JOSEPH R. LALLO

BYPASS GEMINI

Bypass Gemini
StoryBundle Edition

Joseph R. Lallo

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Prologue

Bolts of energy slapped into the engine bank, sizzling against the hull and causing the instruments to scream angry messages. There was a pop and the whole ship lurched downward. Lex pulled madly at the controls and hammered at the computer's interface. Neither felt like cooperating anymore.

"I repeat, you are entering my debris field, idiot. Alter course or become a part of it," a voice squawked over the com system.

"For God's sake, I am in distress! Out of control! Request immediate assistance!" Lex screamed.

A cloud of fist-sized debris splashed against the belly of the ship in a sound like a shotgun blast hitting a tin shack.

"Oh, man. If you think anyone can save you now, you have got your head so-o-o-o far up your ass. You are seriously fu-"

The rest of the eloquent thought was cut short as a chunk of floating metal passed through the antenna array. It didn't slow down much. A pleasant, calm female voice filled the cockpit.

"Warning. Ship atmospheric containment compromised. Decompression detected. Affix supplemental oxygen supply and stand by for emergency field deployment."

He scrambled to pull the oxygen mask into place, his ears already popping. Mechanical arms emerged from around the control chair, glowing field emitters releasing their electronic whine as they began to charge up. Lex cinched the straps of the mask tight and waited for the field to snap into place. As he waited, listening to the voice make its customary warnings about keeping his hands and arms within the confines of the field, something managed to force its way from the back of his mind, through the assorted panic and confusion, and right to the front.

"The package!" he blurted.

With a desperate grab, he managed to snag a silver case and pull it back to his chest. An instant later the field clicked into place with a faint ruby shimmer, and a hiss of gas restored the proper atmospheric pressure. He took a deep breath, pulled up the backup controls from the side of the harness, and tried to get control over the ship. The pilot assist apparatus was out, but he never used it anyway. Just figure out the parts of the engine array that were damaged, compensate, and get the ship the hell out of this orbiting junkyard before-

He looked up just in time to see a flurry of metal shards, probably the former support structure of some defunct satellite, crash into what was left of his ship's view window. The first one sent cracks feathering through the transparent ceramic. The voice of the computer serenely declared a full hull breach, just in time for a second chunk to shatter through completely. Time seemed to slow as it continued unimpeded through. It spun in air before him for several seconds before it occurred to him that time didn't just seem to

slow... it DID slow. He leaned aside to see a little red indicator on his slowly sparking control panel light up. Next to it were the words “TymFlex™ Safety System Engaged.” Below was a timer, broken out to thousandths of seconds, ticking down from sixty. The numbers were creeping by.

The effect was surreal. He could see the ripple of tiny shock waves as clumps of metal clashed with his hull. All around him bits of debris of various sizes sparkled in the starlight, slowly spinning and sailing along in their orbits. Bits of his ship’s window drifted through the cabin, glancing harmlessly off of the emergency field around his chair. As a blunt, irregular shaped piece of wreckage, now moving slowly enough for him to recognize it as a door handle, rebounded off of the shield and spiraled lazily back into space, he tried to remember what the salesman had said when he was pitching this safety system.

It worked by creating a localized distortion in spacetime, or something like that. Lex had never been good with details. Time within the distortion moved one hundred or so times faster than outside. The salesman had explained that this reduced the kinetic energy of potentially lethal projectiles by making the universe think they had slowed down. 2000 meters per second became 20, not because the meters decreased, but because the seconds outside of the field were comparatively increased. The result was that the hunk of high density tungsten that had formerly been moving several thousand miles an hour toward his forehead now clunked off the shield with the force of a lobbed softball. This was achieved with quantum this and temporal that and various other high tech buzzwords that had been used to pad out the brochure. The wonders of science.

Of course, it wasn’t without its flaws. The main one was that, if his math was right, the 59.378 seconds remaining would take over an hour. It gave him a lot of time to dwell on a few rather pressing questions. For instance, why had the ship that was now passing overhead decided to shoot at him? Why did this planet, supposedly uninhabited, have a lunatic shouting profanities at him over the com system? Did it have a breathable atmosphere? How exactly would a bubble of compressed time protect him from becoming a thin red paste when his ship hit the ground? He watched what appeared to be a novelty floor mat drift through the space beside the ship like it was flowing in molasses and decided that, since he didn’t have any control over any of that, he might as well work on the most important question. What the hell had gone wrong in his life that he had ended up in this mess?

Chapter 1

"What'll it be today, T?" asked the cook.

He was more or less the stereotypical short order cook: greasy whitish apron, greasy grayish hair, greasy blackish cookie-duster mustache, and a pot belly from too much of his own greasy merchandise. The name on the apron said Mel, though it was anyone's guess why, since his name was Marv. He'd run "Starvin' Marvin's Curb Counter" for about as long as anyone could remember. It was almost literally a hole in the wall, just a couple of stools and a counter carved into the side of a shopping center. It was also the only place anywhere close that took something besides credits as payment. The food wasn't bad either.

"The usual, Marv. And call me Lex, would you?" said Lex.

Travis Alexander was one of those people who could never get a decent nickname to stick. T, TL, Trav, Alexander, he'd tried them all, but either he didn't like them or other people didn't. Unfortunately, a brief and notable flirtation with celebrity a few years back had stuck him with "T-Lex," a name so awful it could only have been conceived by the sports press. After trying and failing to shake it, he'd decided to split the difference and shorten it. Results had been mixed.

"Bowl of chili, no spoon, and a bag of chips, coming up," Marv said.

"And hack me off a slice of that coffee while you're at it. It's been a long night."

Lex looked in the mirror set into the side of the counter. His short brown hair was a mess, and his eyes, also brown, were bloodshot from too little sleep and too much of Marv's coffee. He was also still wearing his courier gear: a red T-shirt covered with his corporate logo, a messenger bag plastered with the same, and cargo pants that, while functional, weren't terribly fashionable. A few hours of sleep and a minute or two with a comb would probably earn him the description "handsome," or at least "rugged," but at the moment he was trending more toward "train wreck." Working three jobs will do that to you. It was also probably why even though he'd been subsisting on a steady diet of foods that congeal if you don't eat them quickly enough, he still qualified as gangly.

His main job was as a hand courier. He made his way from business to business for same-day deliveries and such. It involved a lot of running around, and the violation of most traffic laws. His second job was as a chauffeur, though there hadn't been much business on that end lately. Planet Golana was basically nothing but a big shipping hub. There were loads of big businesses, and thus loads and loads of white collars floating around, but most of them had their own private drivers, so that left Lex carting around out-of-towners and the slice of the economic spectrum that was too rich to be seen in a cab, but not rich enough to have their own limo. It wasn't a big market. As for the third job? Well... the less said about that, the better.

A bowl of chili, a bag of corn chips, and a plastic cup of coffee that may or may not have been in the pot for the past week were set before him. He opened the chips and used them to systematically shovel the contents of the bowl into his mouth. It wasn't so much eating as refueling, a procedure so practiced and mechanical that he tended to use it as a time to organize his plans for the rest of the day. With his free hand, he fumbled around in his pocket, one by one dropping onto the table the various items one accumulates over the course of the day. Energy bar wrappers, a pack of gum, a lighter, his tool chain. Finally he found what he was looking for.

A thin plastic rectangle, roughly the size of a credit card, clattered down onto the counter top. It was transparent save for a short metallic tab along one of the short edges. It was a slidepad, a device that had become so prevalent you were practically assigned one at birth. The little pad served the purpose of a cell phone, PDA, day planner, key chain, voice recorder, wallet, game system, media player, and virtually anything else one might need in the day. He slid his finger across the screen, causing it to flicker to life. The display area extended beyond the confines of the plastic thanks to "patented HoloEdge technology" according to the ubiquitous commercials. It baffled him that they still advertized the damn thing. It was like advertizing oxygen.

After navigating some menus and tapping off a dozen or so bill reminders, he got to his depressingly empty schedule. Nothing. No dates, no parties, no jobs. A whole weekend with no work or play. The lack of work was the real problem. There were at least a dozen people and companies he owed money to, though fortunately none of them were the sort who would break your knees if you fell behind. Such had not always been the case. Again, the less said, the better. He refilled his pockets and moved to stow the slidepad as well, but Marv interrupted him by loudly clearing his throat.

"As long as you got it out, hows about you pay your tab?" he suggested, his own oil-glazed pad already in hand.

Lex sighed.

"Alright. Brace yourself though, I have to turn the wireless on," he said.

He navigated through the menus and switched on the data connection. A half second later and the pad was vibrating, flashing, and chiming its way through all of the missed calls, messages, and urgent notifications he'd managed to avoid that day.

"Why don't you just leave it on, T?"

"Listen, I carry packages at unsafe speeds, I ferry celebrities around... and the other thing. Unwanted distractions are a no no," he muttered, "How much do I owe you?"

"12800 credits."

"What?!"

"Maybe you should pay more than once a month."

Lex looked at the balance in his account with a grimace. Finally he shrugged.

"Well, paying rent is overrated anyway, right?"

He waved his pad over Marv's. Both devices flashed "Secure transaction" and scanned the fingers for authentication purposes before transferring credits directly from one bank account to the other.

"Sure is nice having you pay the regular way instead of stacks of chips like usual," Marv said.

"Yeah, well don't get too used to it. I need that money for the 98% of the people I owe that don't even take chips. See you next week, Marv."

"You mean tomorrow, right?"

"Heh, probably," Lex said as he walked away.

"Wait, speaking of that 'other thing.' Someone left this for you."

Marv held up a hand written note. Lex snatched it and stuffed it in his pocket.

"Real subtle, Marv."

Sticking to the side of a nearby light pole was his delivery bike. It had the same handlebars and uncomfortable seat of its two wheeled ancestor, but in place of wheels were small circular discs, about the size and shape of a catcher's mitt, facing the ground. Two were in back, on the outside corners of a metal mesh cargo basket the size and shape of a shopping cart, and one was in the front, extending forward a foot or so below the bars. Technically that should make it a trike, but bike sounded cooler, so Lex stuck with that. In days gone by, there would have been a chain keeping people from walking away with it. Now it was held to the nearest immovable metal object with a magnetic clamp. With a wave of his slidepad it dropped to the ground. He climbed on and puttered off.

His neighborhood was a quarter of the way across town, which didn't sound like a long way until one realized that in the era of skyways and mag-lev trains, towns tended to sprawl across several hundred miles. Particularly this place, Preston City. Just about anyone who came to Golana or left it did so from Preston. Thus, for most people getting home on a bike would be a multi-hour ordeal. Bikes were meant for short range, low altitude trips. Sure, they could go just as high and just as fast as standard hovercars, thanks to the lower weight offsetting the lower power, but they offered nothing in the way of safety features. It was you, a helmet, and a few pounds of aluminum strapped to enough thrust to propel you into orbit. You would have to be a lunatic to take such a thing toe to toe with full sized cars. Either that or very, very good. Lex strapped on his helmet and set off.

Twenty-eight minutes, sixty-two miles, and one stern reprimand from the police later, he was walking into his apartment, such as it was. One room, about the size and shape of a jail cell, was his combination bedroom/living room. It had a futon on one wall, a large flatscreen on the other wall, and presumably a coffee table, though that was largely speculation until he got around to cleaning off the mound of take-out boxes. A door on the far end of the room led to the counter with a sink, oven, and dishwasher that could

charitably be called a kitchenette, and from there one could reach his bathroom. It would be nice to suggest that this was a typical apartment, but unfortunately it was only bachelors and the chronically cash-strapped that called places like this home. Lex was currently both.

He docked his slidepad, linking it to the wall display so that he could work through the missed messages on the big screen. The first six video and audio messages all focused on either increasing the size of various parts of his anatomy or hooking him up with women who already had ludicrous anatomies. He was definitely going to have to update that spam filter. He deleted them and moved on. Next was a message from Blake, his buddy at Golana Interstellar, the starport that was more or less the reason for the whole planet.

"Hey, T-man. Listen, there's a convention coming up before that big state of the company thing VectorCorp has planned, so I'm going to need you to, uh... move your... stuff. Oh, and I got this box here. I think it is the... special... thing. For your stuff. Get back to me."

Blake was a friend from back in the good old days. He ran a stardock, the space-faring equivalent of a parking garage, and let Lex keep a certain vehicle there, off the books. The only catch was that he had to get it out of there on short notice if something was likely to fill his place up to capacity, which happened every now and then. The nature of the vehicle in question made Blake a shade skittish about discussing it. The package wasn't terribly legitimate either. He'd have to take care of that some time tomorrow. Next was... uh oh, a Detective Barsky.

"Mr. Alexander. I've got a message here from a VectorCorp security officer who says he's been seeing an awful lot of unlicensed, unscheduled traffic on VectorCorp proprietary routes. I'm sure I don't need to remind you that it is dangerous and unlawful to-"

Deleted. Lex got a message like that one about once a month. The police had nothing on him, but he'd had more than a few run-ins with them in the last few years, so they liked to let him know they had their eyes on him. Next was a group message from Michella Modane.

"Hi everybody on my contact list. I just want to remind you that I'll be broadcasting a live stream for the GolanaNet Financial NewsFeed tomorrow at 3PM before I hop on the transport and cover my first ever off-planet news tour, culminating in the VectorCorp State of the Company Address in a few weeks! So make sure you check it out, I need every hit I can get! Thanks!"

He paused the video just as Michella blew a kiss. Another face from the good old days. Michella had been a friend since grade school, and a girlfriend off and on for most of that time. Since she was sixteen, she had wanted to be an investigative reporter, and at twenty-two had managed to land a job as a financial reporter for the local news agency. It was no surprise when they decided to put her in front of the camera. She had gorgeous auburn hair that gathered on her shoulders like imported chocolate. Her striking blue eyes and

radiant smile gleamed with confidence and integrity. A scattering of freckles made her seem almost approachable, while her curves made Lex glad he'd splurged on the full definition flatscreen. He and she had a rather final falling out after the... incident, but apparently he was still on her contact list. It may only put him on par with her plumber and half of their graduating class, but that still put him head and shoulders above the rest of the galaxy, so as far as he was concerned, there was still hope. He saved the message and moved on.

A handful of debt collectors, ranging from first notice to third notice, but pleasantly no final notices, came next. His dispatcher at the livery firm finished off the inbox with an appointment for 2:45 PM tomorrow. Lex flicked through to the list of videos he had queued up and started sorting through. He was a few weeks behind on most of them, so he picked one at random. A half second of load bar later and he was watching the intro to a halfway decent sitcom. It had the not-quite-right look of a show recorded in 3D but viewed in 2D. Technically his viewer could handle holograms, but with a screen as big as his in a room as small as his, half of the action would be going on behind his head, so he left it 2D. On the plus side, it did give everything a charmingly retro feel. He didn't make it halfway through the episode before it became apparent that Marv's coffee was no longer sufficient for his caffeine needs. He kicked a stack of pizza boxes off of the edge of the futon, laid down, and collapsed.

Chapter 2

Lex checked himself over before dropping the limo down in front of the hotel to wait for his passenger. He'd woken up a bit late and had only had time to shower, shove everything from the cargo pants into the tuxedo pants, and pick up the car. Time hadn't changed the limousine much, other than switching it from a wheeled vehicle to a hovercar. Hell, this one even had little vestigial swoops where the fenders would have been if it had still been equipped with wheels. It was mostly just a very big, very black version of what everyone else was driving, with cushier seats and bar. It wasn't one of the stretched monsters, partially because Lex felt like they were needlessly showy, but mostly because Lex couldn't afford one. The limo was one of the last big purchases he'd made before the bottom fell out of his previous career. He'd expected to be driven around town in it. Now he was doing the driving. As an owner operator, though, he got to keep a much bigger slice of the fee. It just meant he had to wear his own tux, too. You take the good with the bad.

He pulled down the console to look up his fare. The kind of mid-level big spenders that tended to hire him liked it when you knew something about them. It made them feel a little more famous, and that meant a much nicer tip.

"Nicholas Patel," Lex said to the computer.

There were thirty-five pages of results. Super. He poked around the first few. One was an investment banker. One was some sort of entrepreneur. One ran a small contracting firm on a planet in a star system in the middle of nowhere. That one had a disturbingly large stack of news stories linked to him. They all said roughly the same thing, various media euphemisms for crime lord, and the catchy nickname "Diamond Nick."

"Diamond Nick. How come it's the criminals who get all of the good nicknames?" he muttered to himself, as a moving wall outside caught his attention.

When he turned to get a closer look, he realized that what had appeared to be a wall was in reality two very, VERY large men. They had the sort of build you would expect a paleontologist to be pulling out of the ground, about three hundred pounds of muscle with another fifty or so of flab for good measure. The word thug fit so well he wouldn't have been surprised if it was one of their names. Lex scrambled to get out of the car and get the door, but a ham-sized fist grabbed the door handle and pulled it open to allow a slick, swarthy man to enter.

"Diamond Nick, I presume," Lex remarked.

"Heh, word gets around," Patel said with a grin, "Starport, please. Quickly."

Nick was a difficult man to place at first blush. He straddled a few categories. As a crime boss, he looked the part, with a suit that probably cost more than the limo and hair styled to the point of being a fire hazard. His face was typically Indian, as his name would suggest, but his voice was completely

unflavored by accent. That isn't to say that he had an American or English or some other regional accent. He had no accent at all, the sort of diction you usually hear in newscasters and documentary narrators.

His men squeezed through the door and took a seat on either side of him, filling the spacious vehicle almost to capacity.

"Sure thing," Lex said, easing the limo up.

Above them a lane of traffic moved briskly along in a cordoned off strip of the sky. Lex rounded the top of the strip and merged in from the top.

"So, what brings you to Preston City?" he asked.

"I stopped off on this little transit hub of a planet to talk to some folks about a deal I'm looking to close. Turns out you've got more than just a starport. You've got some damn good stellar analysts. Helped me make sure I wasn't being taken to the cleaners."

Now that he'd spoken a few more sentences, there was a hint of slurring and informality to his speech that implied he'd been doing some imbibing that morning.

"Sounds like you might have been doing some celebrating. I guess this deal of yours was pretty big?"

"The god damned biggest deal of the god damned century."

"Nice. What kind of deal are we talking about?"

"Business."

"Any specific business, or the 'mind your own' variety?"

"Smart man. Say, don't I know you?" Patel asked, stretching to look at his chauffeur in the rear view mirror.

"I seriously doubt that."

"No, no. I never forget a voice. Dean, where do I know this man?"

One of the neanderthals shrugged. On a man that size it was a veritable geological event. Patel snapped his fingers.

"I know it! Do me a favor. Say, 'I regret my actions at the Tremor Intersystem Grand Prix' or something to that effect."

Lex shot the man a sharp look. Patel grinned.

"I was right. You're that disgraced racer, T-Lex."

"Congratulations," Lex said bitterly, "It's just Lex now, by the way."

"My boy, I should buy you a drink. I made a killing off of that race."

"You did?"

"Naturally. The fellow who paid you to fix it was an associate of mine. He told me to put money down on number 55. I tell you it was a veritable work of art the way you worked that race. Anyone can simply not win, but to coax another racer, a specific one, into first? Genius!"

For some, it is the birth of their first child. For others it is the loss of a loved one. One day everyone will have that burning hot memory that splits life into before and after. For Lex, it had been two years ago. He'd been on a meteoric rise in the racing circuit. Hovercars, or hoversleds as they tended to be called in competition, were easily as fast as a fighter jet and, when their

hover pods were close to the ground, nearly as nimble as a dune buggy. It made for an exciting and therefore profitable sport, and Lex was on the fast track to being one of its superstars. A life of fame and glory seemed like a foregone conclusion, so he decided to get a head start on the high life. Unfortunately, his tastes outpaced his career, and before long he was neck deep in debt with the wrong sort of people. The Tremor Intersystem Grand Prix looked like it was going to be his way out. If he won it, the prize money would kill easily half of his debts, and the endorsements would take care of the rest. The lowlifes he'd borrowed from must have realized that he was about to get out from under their thumb and moved up the payment schedule. When Lex couldn't keep up, they offered a deal. The race's long shot was some nobody driver in the number fifty-five sled. Very long odds. If that man were to win, they would consider things square. He'd pulled it off, but the racing commission smelled something foul. Eventually they proved what he'd done and booted him from sled racing. After that, no legitimate racing promotion would have him. Too much like letting a jewel thief work at your jewelry store. And going underground? He wasn't stupid enough to try that. Careers tended to end swiftly and suddenly in those places.

"That's a part of my life I don't like to reflect on," muttered Lex.

"How much did they pay you, anyway?"

"They let me keep my thumbs."

"Good price. So you were in debt?"

"Up to my eyeballs."

"I trust they wiped it ALL out."

"Yeah, but that didn't get the legitimate bill collectors off my back."

"Oh, yes. Well. That's the way it goes, isn't it? The only difference between organized crime and organized business is with crime, there aren't any pretenses. You should have... What the hell is that?"

"That? That's rush hour."

There had been the belief that, once science had fulfilled the long held promise of flying cars, traffic jams would be a thing of the past. Those who held this belief clearly had never spoken to an air traffic controller. Airplanes could fly, after all, and while they didn't have to deal with stop-and-go traffic, they did have to cope with holding patterns and painfully bureaucratic procedures and routes. The current state of things split the difference. Highways had been replaced with skyways, carefully delineated corridors in the sky, traced out by hovering pylons and laser fences. They were a few cars wide and a few cars tall. And when they got clogged? It wasn't just a traffic jam. It was six traffic jams stacked one on top of the other.

"How long until we get to the starport?" he asked flatly.

"Assuming it breaks up when it usually does? About three hours."

"The elevator to my flight is at 3:05..."

Lex glanced at the clock in the dash. 2:48.

"Well, that's the way it goes, isn't it?" Lex quipped.

Patel growled and checked a watch that could probably finance a college education.

"When is the next flight that will get me to Operlo?" he rumbled.

After a few taps at the console in the dash, a list of ships heading to the tiny system on the fringe of the populated portion of the galaxy scrolled across the display.

"6:45," Lex said.

"That's tolerable. As long as it gets me there by Monday," Patel said.

"Sorry. That's a class 2 transport. It's half the speed of the 3:05... yep. It looks like the earliest you'll be getting there is Wednesday morning, if you take the 11:50."

"No... No, that's not acceptable. I NEED to be back by Monday. I have an exceedingly important business meeting that must be face to face. This deal falls through if I don't shake hands with these weasels. They'll give bandwidth rights to the miscreant on the other end!"

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that, sir, *whatever* it means. I'm afraid you should have planned for traffic, chartered a direct flight, or at least sprung for a temporary express to the starport."

That was one of the nice parts about the skyways. Since they were only marked by pylons, for a fee the skyway service would toss a few dozen extra into the sky to map out a direct road from where you are to where you want to be. Even now he could see a swarm of them tracing off a web of personal roads for big shots looking to avoid the rush.

"Too late for any of that now. We won't even get to the next designated off ramp by the time your flight leaves."

"This is a problem..."

"My heart goes out for you, Mr. Patel, but there's nothing we can do now, so just relax and enjoy a complimentary beverage."

"… You know... if you were to somehow get me to that flight on time... I would be inclined to show my gratitude."

Lex's eyes shot to the rear view mirror, his hand slowly working toward an innocuous piece of the dashboard.

"How much gratitude are we talking about?"

Diamond Nick snapped his fingers and one of his henchmen dug into a pocket, dumping a handful of colorful plastic discs into his open hand. They looked like poker chips, because that's what they were. These days gambling, like any other business, had become franchised. Betting parlors were as common as tanning parlors, and they all used the same chips. The rise in popularity of the miniature corporate and privately owned casinos coincided almost perfectly with the rise of the credit system. Direct-linked bank accounts and universal "credits" had replaced cash entirely, making all transactions quick, easy, and traceable. The chips had a set credit value, were nearly impossible to counterfeit, and were untraceable. They filled the void left by paper money, and were legitimate enough that some people actually

paid their employees in chips. It was a handy way to keep things off the books, and it was just a quick trip to the casino to turn them into spendable credits.

Patel held up six blue chips. Ten thousand credits each.

"I could lose my license if I don't do this right, Mr. Patel. I'm going to need a little more gratitude than that."

"I love a man who knows how to negotiate," he said with a grin, swapping blue for red.

Red chips were fifty thousand credits each for a nice even three hundred thousand. The number sounded more impressive than it was. Inflation and such meant that a decent cup of coffee would run you four or five hundred credits. That said, three hundred thousand would be enough to cover his rent and maybe take the heat off from some of the more vigorous bill collectors.

"Get me to that space elevator in time to board the flight and it is all yours."

Lex's eyes shot from the mirror, to the dashboard, to the traffic, and back to the mirror. Finally he dug out a piece of gum and popped it in his mouth.

"Strap in," he said, adding "You hereby absolve Lex Express and its parent company Milton Livery Limited of any liability for laws broken or trauma endured. Thank you."

Three taps to an out-of-the-way part of the dash caused the console to flash and reveal a rather crude and pixelated set of controls. He slid his finger along a color slider, then checked two boxes.

"What was that?" Patel asked, craning his neck to see the panel.

"We just became a cream colored limo with a nonsense license plate and the transponder code of an ambulance."

As he spoke, the black finish visible on the hood of the limo patchily gave way to off-white. Generally speaking, the hot-swap paint system was supposed to be only for display cars, but certain less than scrupulous mechanics would install it for anyone looking to change their vehicle's color on a whim. The transponder spoofer and license scrambler were hand-me-downs from a certain other enterprise Lex was involved in.

He maneuvered the limo up and to the left. There wasn't enough space between vertical lanes to slip through, and there wasn't nearly enough between horizontal ones, but at the right angle he could j-u-u-st thread the needle in the caddy corner space. He found the groove and accelerated. If life was simple, he could have just done that the whole way. As it happened, people liked to drift in and out of their lanes, change lanes in hopes of gaining a few car lengths, things of that nature. That didn't even account for the people who liked to impose the rules of the road by purposely moving just enough to block the way. Finding a safe route required a very specific skill set and razor sharp reflexes. The sort of things a racer might have.

Lex wove his way recklessly through the traffic, gaining speed all the way. He pitched and tilted the limo, swooping up and over low profile cars,

twisting sideways between narrow ones, and slicing through openings a fraction of an inch larger than the car itself. In the back, his passengers were getting rather severely shaken up as they fumbled for the five point restraints. The sturdy, well designed buckles and straps were the modern replacements for seat belts, which basically meant that they were ignored until right after they were needed.

"What the hell are you doing?" Patel objected.

"Merging. Aggressively. I TOLD you to strap in," Lex said, pulling hard to the right to catch the turn for the starport.

"I thought you were just going to leave the skyway! Go straight there!"

"No, sir. Crossing the edge of the skyway would trigger all sorts of traffic alerts. Cops would be on me in fifteen seconds and we wouldn't be going anywhere. Nope, the secret is to cut right through the middle. That way, even if they see you, they have to GET to you, so you-"

"Never mind the explanations, kid, just pay attention to where you're going!"

"Yes, sir."

Despite having the same operating principles, there were subtle differences between the hoversleds you'd find on a race track and the hovercars you'd find on a skyway. For one, a car in general, and a limo in particular, doesn't have very much need to adjust pitch. The barrel roll isn't a standard maneuver during a commute, after all. That meant that rather than being incorporated into a joystick or flight yolk style controller as in a sled, a car manipulated such things with hard to reach switches and knobs. Pulling off the acrobatics Lex was achieving required constantly moving hands from this control to that and back again. The ex-racer did so flawlessly, his hands darting with the frantic grace of a sideshow freak juggling broken bottles.

As the clock on the dash bleeped for the three o'clock hour, flashing lights showed up in the mirror. Three boxy police cars drifted up along the outside of the skyway, and an angry voice croaked across the radio.

"You are driving recklessly. Leave the skyway and remand yourself and your vehicle to-"

Lex tapped a button on the display and the transmission was swallowed by stuttering digital distortion.

"Well would you look at that. Radio's on the fritz."

Ahead, cars began to bunch up, pulling over to allow the cops to enter. Rather than ride the wake right into some sort of an intercept maneuver, Lex managed to shove himself ahead of the wave of shifting cars, squeezed between traffic and the lower corner of the skyway.

"You sure you know what you're doing?" Patel asked as the bottoms of cars whipped by his window close enough to rattle the panes.

"Oh, sure. We're heading down now. Once this baby gets her repulsors dug into the ground, I can REALLY start moving."

Right on cue, the ground came whipping up beneath them. No longer

simply held aloft by anti-gravity units, the vehicle's futuristic replacements for wheels could be put to work. Bigger, beefier versions of the same things that made his delivery bike work, the repulsors used the interplay between two tangible energy fields to create a synchronized wave pattern capable of instituting temporary charge differences between the vehicle and road surface for the purposes of facilitating the attraction and repulsion necessary to maintain an approximately constant distance.

In other words, he had traction now.

Traction meant sharper turns, quicker stops, and generally more room for suicidal stunts. The ground also meant that the cops would have things like buildings and pedestrians to worry about. Lex would have to worry about those things too, of course, but as the pursue-ee, he had the benefit knowing where he was going. Right now, that was a sharp right into the entry tunnel to the lower levels of the starport.

"That's arrivals! We want departures!"

"Yes, Mr. Patel. I'm familiar with how starports work," Lex said calmly, watching the clock roll over to 3:02. He throttled down until they were actually moving slightly slower than the surrounding traffic. Behind them the police were held up in the bottleneck of the tunnel's entrance. "Do me a favor and push your head and neck firmly against the headrest."

"Why-"

"Now please."

The departure and arrival tunnels ran side by side in opposite directions, with the usual sections of wall removed to allow easier access for maintenance and emergency crews. Lex juiced the repulsors, lurching the limo upward, then flipped them off. This sent the ponderous luxury vehicle into a graceful leap. He then twiddled a knob and pulled hard at the wheel, pivoting the vehicle such that the bottom aligned with the narrow edge of the gap in the wall. He flipped another switch, maxing out the repulsors again and slowly easing them down as they approached the wall. They came to a stop halfway up the wall, with the bottom of the limo inches away from it. He then juiced the repulsors once more, sending the limo springing off again. The end result was a bizarre mixture of stunt driving and parkour. It took moments and shifted the car from keeping up with traffic in one direction to keeping up with traffic in the other, with a wall jump in between.

"Gotta love the luxury class models. Inertial dampeners for a smoother ride. Try that sort of thing in an economy model and we're looking at concussions and/or paralysis."

He eased the limo into a lane, flipped the plate and transponder back to the way they ought to be, and returned it to an unremarkable black color. A few moments later, 3:03, he pulled up at the appropriate gate. There was a little bit of a commotion in the tunnel behind them as the handful of drivers who witnessed the stunt made their way out of the snarl it caused, but when something like that happens in front of you, you tend to fixate on the event

itself rather than where the thing went afterward or whether it had changed color. Besides, anyone on foot seemed to be distracted by a tight huddle of bodies off to the side surrounding some bright lights and flashing cameras.

"Bags!" Nick barked at his men as they stepped out of the car on wobbly legs.

Lex got out of the driver's seat and held the door in standard chauffeur fashion.

"Thank you for choosing Lex Express. First class boarding line is right over there, Mr. Patel. The time is... 3:04:12. Best hop on," he said, holding his white-gloved hand crisply in the universal sign for 'tip me.'

"You crazy bastard," Patel said with a smile and a shake of his head, as though it was princely praise. "Here's your money, and well earned. If you ever need a decent job-"

"I'll stop you right there," Lex said, holding up a hand, "I've had enough of those kinds of jobs."

Diamond Nick pulled the hand down by the wrist and gave it a bone crushing shake.

"Even so, drop me a line, madman."

When he took his hand away, he left behind a business card. He then followed his muscle into the elevator a few moments before they shut the door. Lex looked the card over. An honest-to-goodness business card. Printed on paper. It was charmingly anachronistic, like sending a postcard written in fountain pen. The fact that it left no electronic trail probably helped. It left a paper trail, sure, but a computer can't search a paper trail. Slipping it into an inside pocket, Lex leaned against the limo and let the aftermath of the rush roll over him, admiring the place as he did.

The starport was like any transport hub, only magnified a few dozen times. It was big, open, and crowded. Half of the place was devoted to arrivals, the other departures. Along with a veritable shopping mall of overpriced shops there was a massive, matte black cable in the center, a space tether. The thing stood like a sequoia, extending up and out of sight. It was joined by about three dozen others of various sizes, each anchored in the center of a near identical cluster of shops and gates, all lined up along a 20 mile stretch of the planet's equator. Technically the entire row taken as a whole was a single starport, but locally and professionally the tethers were treated as different facilities. It made sense, since each one led to a stardock devoted to a different quadrant of space.

Flashing lights at the corner of his vision caught Lex's attention. Across the port, police were going over the arrivals area with a fine toothed comb. True, they would be looking for the wrong color, but even so it was likely not the best time to be standing next to a limo. He climbed in, smiled, and headed off to redeem his tip.

Chapter 3

Lex stumbled up to the door of his apartment building. After putting the limo back in the livery garage he had decided do some celebrating. He'd cashed in his tip at the biggest casino in town, except for one chip. After the day he'd had, a little fun was in order. He'd left his tux on (if he was going to celebrate, he may as well do it in style) and hit the blackjack table. Lex was by no means a professional gambler, or even a talented amateur, but he could make his money last long enough to get his fill of complementary food and drinks. By the time he'd decided he'd had enough, his fifty thousand credit chip had turned into a pair of thousand credit chips, a belly full of shrimp cocktail, and about three rum and cokes too many. Following a return bike ride filled with the kind of slow caution only alcohol can inspire, he was at his door.

With the bike powered down on one shoulder, he fumbled for his slidepad and swiped it past the door panel. The only result was a disappointing beep. He tried a few more times with similar results before he was able to force aside enough of the haze of inebriation to notice the message on the screen to go along with the sad little noise. It was not good. It was SO not good, in fact, that he decided it must be wrong. He pulled up the building directory on the panel, slurred his landlady's name, and a few minutes later was greeted by a less than charming voice.

"What the hell do you want?" came the voice of an aging and irritable woman.

The video on the screen was illuminated only by the light of her display, giving her face the grainy, washed out look that was so popular in the sort of videos that make the careers of porn stars and ruin the reputations of movie starlets. Picturing his landlady in such a performance nearly brought back some of the shrimp cocktail.

"Hi, Mrs. Dunne. There's something wrong with the panel."

"Do you know what time it is?!"

"Uh, no, actually," he said, checking his pad. He grimaced. 11:10. "Sorry about that. Uh, about the panel though. It says I'm evicted."

"That's because you ARE evicted, Alexander."

"Wh- What? But it's like," he sputtered, checking the date on his pad, "The eighteenth. Rent is only three days late!"

"This month's rent is. I'm still waiting for the last three months!"

"I paid April! ... Mostly."

"Get off my property, Alexander," she said, reaching for the screen.

"Wait, wait, wait!" he said, quickly tapping through a few directories and shortcuts on the pad before pressing his thumb to it, dumping the contents of his bank account into hers, "There!"

She grumbled and brought up something on the side of her screen.

"You're still half a month shy."

"At least let me in to get changed!"

"Oh, no. You'll go in, grab your stuff, and I'm out half a month's rent. The door stays locked until we're square. I'll consider the crap in your apartment collateral."

The transmission cut off, and any further attempts to reach her dumped directly to a video away message, one she'd recorded two months earlier when her cat was sick and she'd never bothered to update. Finally he gave up and flipped his bike on so he'd have a place to sit.

"Okay, Lex. You're homeless, you're drunk, you're broke, and you're wearing a tuxedo," he assessed, "You've had better days."

He considered his options, but the potent mixture of alcohol, sugar, and seafood was gumming up the works. Eventually, he settled on the same choice a thousand other drunk, lonely men had made before him.

He decided to call his ex.

For the first time in longer than he cared to consider, he had to dig deeper into his contacts than his favorites list, which was currently dominated by take-out restaurants. Eventually he found Michella. Next to her name, a short sequence of video clips silently rolled by. He watched them for a minute. Half of them were of her angrily telling him to shut the camera off. There were a few of her in her racetrack outfit. She wanted to be as close to the track as possible, so they made her an honorary member of the pit crew, complete with ad-strewn jumpsuit. The last one was her signature wink and blown kiss. Finally he tapped her name. The wireless flipped on, causing the missed messages count to skyrocket, and a moment later the words "Establishing Connection" began to pulsate across the screen.

Lex held out the pad, raked his fingers through his hair, and tried to straighten his bow tie. He was still working at it when the feed connected.

"Trevor," she said.

For a single word, she managed to deliver it with an impressive depth of meaning. There was a hint of disappointment, a heap of irritation, and just the tiniest speck of reminiscence.

"Hi, Mitch... ella," he stumbled. He remembered just a moment too late that she hated the nickname Mitch. (It sounded too much like something else.) He'd taken to using it to playfully annoy her. Now probably wasn't the time for that. "Been a while. I, uh, I didn't wake you up, did I?"

There was no need to ask. He clearly hadn't. From the angle of things, she'd answered at her workstation. She was wearing the glasses she wore in private, since she was too skittish for corrective surgery, and an old beat up t-shirt. On the desk beside her was a cup, no doubt filled with hot chocolate. The image brought memories surging back. How many times had he seen her like that, in the evenings after class at college? The only thing missing was himself in the background, quizzing her on her broadcasting notes or wasting the night on a racing game. The visions washed over him as he stared at her face. Even without makeup, even as she would never dare be seen in public,

she was magnificent.

"No, no. Working late. Actually, I was about to call you."

"You... you were? That's cool. Me too."

After more than a year and a half without more than an exchanged nod at the odd party or yesterday's group message, it should have struck him as unlikely. His drunken mind wasn't quite so skeptical.

"Yeah. You remember what I was doing today?"

His face screwed up as he rummaged through his booze addled memory.

"The... uh... The news thing! At the starport!" he declared triumphantly.

"Right, right. Well, I was going through some of the B-Roll we shot, and you'll never guess who I saw."

"Who?"

"You."

She made some motion off screen and the corner of the slidepad showed video from the starport earlier that day. The camera was actually pointed at some business bigwig or something, but as she fiddled with the controls the video zoomed over his right shoulder and there he was, in his tux, right next to the limo.

"Wow. Look at that. Am I gonna be in the broadcast?"

She sighed heavily.

"Who's that man with you, Trev?" she asked flatly.

"Uh, that's... Oh..."

More memories came flooding back. Not good ones. Michella had stood by him when he started slipping into debt. She'd even stood by him when he was found out for throwing the race. The last straw had been when she found out why. Everything else she could put aside, but the moment she heard that mobsters were involved, she exploded. And now there he was, the frame frozen in the corner of the screen showing him with-

"Nicholas 'Nicky the Diamond' Patel!" she hissed.

"It's Diamond Nick, actually," he blurted stupidly.

"Oh, well excuse me. I'm not one of his lackeys."

"Hey, hey. It isn't like that. He hired the limo. He was just a client."

"Oh yeah, then what's this?"

The video flipped forward a few more frames, to the point where the tip was delivered. She then zoomed in on the exchange, blowing up the video enough to clearly make out all six chips, and even read the denomination on the top one. Damn high resolution cameras.

"It wasn't... I didn't do anything illegal for him. Well... not MOBSTER illegal. I just got him to the starport quick. That's it!"

"That IS it, Trevor. I... I'd been keeping an eye on you, you know. It looked like I might have been wrong. I WANTED to be wrong, you know? The limo thing. The delivery boy thing on the side. Decent, legitimate work. I thought you'd changed." She faltered, the tears showing in her voice before they showed in her eyes, "Good bye, Trevor. Don't call me again."

The transmission cut off. He tried to reconnect, but all he got in reply was a friendly voice cheerfully informing him that "calls to this account have been blocked by request." He flipped wireless off again out of reflex, shoved the pad into his pocket, and left his hand there. Unless he was mistaken, Michella had just managed to break up with him again without ever having gotten back together. There ought to be some kind of law against that.

"Okay. To recap, then. I am homeless, drunk, in a tuxedo, and my ex-girlfriend, who has been spying on me apparently, thinks I'm in with the mob again. And she knows I'm a delivery boy... I wonder how much drunker I can get."

He rummaged around and pulled out the two measly chips. Now that he'd emptied out his account trying to pay his back rent, it was all he had.

"That's not gonna do it. I gotta... I gotta..." Lex muttered before shaking vigorously to attempt to stop his head from spinning. He only succeeded in increasing the rpm.

"Okay. Okay. I need money. And I should probably try to straighten things out with Mitch. Thank God she didn't find out about the other thing..."

It took a moment for the realization to push its way though the fog of rum.

"The other thing!"

He sifted through his pockets until he found the note Marv had handed him, which thankfully had come along with the rest of the contents of his pockets when he'd made the hasty change. After a moment to coax his eyes into focus, he read the message out loud.

"Dear Sir. Very important package. Must be delivered. Will meet in Twilight Park, Upper West Downing Street. Will discuss details. Price no object. 12:01 September 19th."

He looked at his slidepad again. That gave him a little more than a half an hour to sober up and get to the meeting place. West Downing wasn't too far away. It wasn't impossible. He climbed unsteadily onto the delivery bike and set off. First step, sobering up.

Science has a nasty habit of solving the little problems first. Cancer hadn't quite been cured yet. Poverty and hunger still lingered in the usual places. Crime clearly still existed. There may still have been a long way to go on the important stuff, but the hangover was damn sure a thing of the past. You could stop at any corner store and find three name brand pills and a half dozen generics that would metabolize all of the alcohol in the bloodstream, bind up and neutralize all of the toxins, and leave you feeling like a new man inside of five minutes. You'd even pass a breathalizer test, though cops had stopped using them a while back in favor of an on site tox-screen that wasn't so easily fooled. Lex managed to find a bodega that was willing to hand him a bottle of the number one brand, Sobrietin (no sense taking chances), along with a bottle of water and a comb for one of his chips. Once it kicked in enough for his usual level of ridership to be something less than suicide, he set off for the rendezvous.

He touched down in Twilight Park with a few minutes to spare. It was a fairly nice park, with expertly mowed grass, neat rows of trees, quaint benches, and a playground. All in all it was nothing remarkable, except that it was two hundred stories off the ground, situated on a terrace of a three-hundred story residential building. They called it twilight park because the combination of nearby buildings and overhanging balconies meant that it only got direct sun just as the day was coming to an end. Lex picked an out-of-the-way spot that would give him a decent view of anyone who came and left the park, and took a moment to straighten himself up. He combed his hair, stowed his bike on a nearby lamp post, and retied his bow tie. If he was going to be wearing a tux for this, he might as well look like it had been on purpose.

At precisely 12:01 an anxious looking young woman started to make her way up the path from the entrance. He stepped into the circle of light below a lamppost, waved a gloved hand to get her attention, then stepped back into the shadows. She was like something out of a film noir classic: Long white coat, matching wide brimmed hat, conspicuous brushed metal case about the size of thin stack of file folders. It was difficult to tell exactly what she looked like, the informant outfit doing an excellent job of masking her features, but she was tall and slender. The nervous energy showed in her walk, brisk and stiff. She arrived, carefully avoiding the light and joining Lex in the shadows.

"You are the, ah, the courier?" she asked anxiously.

She had a plain face and mousy brown hair pulled back. Up close he could see that she was perhaps an inch taller than him and rail thin. There was something about her that made it seem like she ought to be wearing glasses but wasn't. Her voice was shaky but precise, wringing every ounce of pronunciation out of the word 'courier.' Everything about her screamed 'academic,' as though she were a professor or librarian at a masquerade party. This clearly wasn't something that she was comfortable doing, but she was trying her very best to play the role. She cast a wary glance up and down his wardrobe.

Lex straightened his tie. "I had a prior engagement. This is the package, I presume?"

"Yes, yes. I need this delivered, but before I agree to give it to you I need your assurances on a number of points."

"I'll endeavor to oblige."

"It is beyond important that this be delivered with the utmost of discretion. No one should know that you have it or where it is going. You should not look at the package's contents, and above all else no aspect of this delivery should be made known to VectorCorp. I cannot stress this point enough."

"That's not an uncommon request. It is something of a specialty, in fact."

"Yes, I know. I did a lot of research before settling on your services. You were the only freelancer on the planet with no formal citations. I wasn't even sure if you were legitimate at first."

"Oh, I'm the real thing."

That Lex most certainly was. Once his indiscretions had closed off racing as an outlet for his talents, there were precious few jobs to feed his need for a challenge. The military was always looking for a few good pilots, but once they had them they didn't do anything but show off at the airshows. The space-based combat was fought almost entirely with automated drones these days. Conflicts could rage for years without a single loss of human life. Usually the victory went to whoever had the best production line and the best AI. Transport Captains spent most of their time babysitting autopilot, too. That really only left him with the choice of freelance courier, the sort of person who carries things that for one reason or another the client doesn't want to put into the hands of one of the big three transport companies.

"I can do the job for you, Miss..."

"No names."

"Alright, Miss No Name. I can do the job, but I should warn you that I'm not a fan of transporting illegal stuff. Drugs, corporate espionage. I need to know that's not what's in this package."

While it was true that he preferred not to deal in such things, he'd made the statement primarily out of liability concerns. On the off chance this was a sting, or he was in some way being monitored, it would be handy to have it made clear that he at least had been told that it was on the up and up.

"No, no, nothing like that. Just something... private. I need the package delivered to a locker in the Lon Djinn region of Makou, Tessera V."

"That's a fair distance away. Any time table?"

"As soon as possible, but don't sacrifice secrecy for speed. When can you have it there?"

Lex ran a few calculations in his head, plotting out the route, figuring the maximum time and adding a reasonable buffer.

"To keep myself out of VectorCorp's patrol space the whole way? Eight days."

She chewed her lip for a moment. The time worried her. And not just the time. She was practically trembling, the case and purse clutched tightly in her hands. This was something serious, something that had her on edge. It was clear that the cloak and dagger stuff wasn't just for show to her. She really thought it was necessary.

"I might be able to squeeze a bit more speed out of the old ship if I tune it a bit first. I could do it in six," Lex offered.

There goes that buffer. Clearly he'd made an impression, though. A whisper of tension was relieved, and she allowed herself a shaky sigh.

"As long as you are sure you can make it there."

"I assure you," he said, placing a hand on her shoulder, "Your package will be delivered safely and secretly. You don't have to worry about it. I don't fail at this sort of thing. Now, as for the fee."

This was always the trickiest part. Some people wanted a private courier

because they could not afford VectorCorp. Clearly this woman was interested in the privacy angle. That meant he could charge a premium. He had to select a price that would cover his expenses with enough headroom to at least get him back into his apartment and cover the bills until his next legitimate paycheck, but not so much that it would scare her away. A number formed in his head.

"I can give you 1.5 million credits. The first half million right now and the remainder will be provided by the recipient upon delivery," she said quickly.

"That will do."

Her offer was at least triple what he normally charged for a high security job like this, and more than double what he'd been thinking of asking. It was all he could do to keep the smile off of his face.

"Excellent. Here is the package," she said, handing him the case and fishing out a large envelope bulging at the bottom, "This is your first payment. The full delivery details are inside. Please, hurry."

She lingered for a moment, looking for the life of her like she'd just handed over her first born. Lex marched away, leaving his bike where it was. His client seemed skittish enough as it was. The visual of him taking off on the same sort of vehicle a pizza boy might use would probably make her think twice about her decision to trust him. When she decided to move, she moved quickly, looking furtively in either direction before disappearing out of a different door than she'd entered. After a long enough delay to be sure she wasn't watching, he pulled down his bike and piloted out over the city.

If he was going to make it to Tessera V in six days without drawing too much attention he was going to have to leave pretty much immediately, but that was fine with him. May as well let the landlady stew a few days. Paying her off right when she asked might make her think he'd been holding out on her. Besides, a few days plotting out routes and listening to engines purr would be a chance to settle his nerves and get away from his troubles for a while. A trip like this was long overdue.

Chapter 4

The most costly part of space travel, in the old days, had been the takeoff. Escaping a planet's gravity well took a huge amount of energy, and it all had to be done under conventional propulsion. Ways had been found to do an end run around the laws of physics in terms of exceeding light speed without needing the energy of an exploding star to pull it off, but those methods were dangerous to do inside a star system, and more or less impossible in an atmosphere. An early and still popular method to ease the energy cost of this first step in space-faring was the invention of the space elevator. It wasn't anything special, just a very long tether hooked up to a space station in low orbit, but it let you load-lift and haul material into space without pesky concerns about thrust and escape velocity.

Lex puttered to a stop at one of the four service tethers at Golana Interstellar. They were skinny things compared to the mighty commuter and cargo tethers, but they let the maintenance crew ferry parts and personnel to the station without interrupting scheduled trams. He shouldered his bike and pressed a thumb to the scanner. It gave a satisfying bleep and the security door swished open. Back in his racing days, Lex had done a fair amount of performance tuning on his ships, cars, and sleds. He wasn't the best mechanic around, but he knew his way around an engine, so Blake registered him as a part timer at his garage for those times when things were getting a little backed up and he needed the extra help. One of the added benefits was free, 'round the clock access to 'The Upstairs,' Golana Interstellar's orbital section.

"Hey, Denny. Mention the tux and I'll slap you," Lex said with a nod to the teenager working the security desk.

"Hi, Mr. Alexander. Reason for tram usage?" he squeaked.

"I need to shuttle some ships around for Blake. I'll be taking one off planet, so it's going to be a multi-day thing."

"Sure thing."

A few minutes later a tram the size of a shipping container came zipping up from below the loading deck. Maintenance tethers were in pairs, one up and one down. It helped keep the traffic flowing when a schedule wasn't possible. The gate released a pressurized hiss as it disengaged and he stepped inside. It was a no frills vehicle, little more than a super-sized elevator with a row of seats along one wall, and a matching one upside-down above them. A few more minutes passed while they waited to see if anyone else was going to be burning the midnight oil, then the doors closed and sealed. A control panel on the door worked its way through a sequence of safety checks. Air pressure: Nominal. Tether Integrity: Nominal. Power Integrity: Nominal. Inertial Inhibitor: Active. A pair of heavy duty electric motors whined with effort and the tram began to accelerate upwards.

If he was a first-timer, he would have been awed by the speed of it. The various floors of the maintenance building shot by in a blur of stone and

metal, and then the ground was dropping away as though gravity had decided to reverse and he was now falling upward. The acceleration should have been enough to pin him painfully to the floor, but the very same thing that made the limo stunt survivable was at work here as well, doing the job it was actually invented to do. Through the sort of complex quantum physics that a science geek would spend three hours gushing over and the average person would write off as magic, a field generator inside the tram canceled out the excess acceleration, keeping the ride at a rock steady 1g. Without it, the whole ride would either be much slower, much less comfortable, or likely a combination of the two.

About a third of the way through the trip the motors approached their top speed and the acceleration started to drop, the gravity going along with it. Lex grabbed one of the hand rails scattered liberally along the walls and pivoted himself upside-down with a yawn. Artificial gravity was possible, but it was a much larger and more expensive process, so the elevator and most small ships did without. A warning light began to blink on a panel, and the readout listing motor status switched from 'Powered' to 'Regenerative Breaking.' The gravity came back, though this time on the ceiling, and he took a seat on one of the chairs that seemed so out of place at the beginning of the trip. Barely three minutes after he'd left the surface, the gravity drifted away again and the tram clicked into the docking section of The Upstairs.

"Hey! T-Lex!" said the orbiting counterpart of the squeaky teen.

"Just Lex, thanks. Heading to Blake's. Ignore the tux."

"You said it, T-Man!"

Lex grumbled. There were a lot of people up here that he'd had semi-professional ties with back when he was a C-List celebrity, so it still came as a thrill to them when he showed up. They were having an even harder time adjusting to his fall from grace than he'd had. For the first few dozen visits it had been like having salt in an open wound to hear them ask what starlets he'd been partying with, but now it was just background noise. If zero-g and working in orbit could become humdrum, what chance did a few behind the times security guards have?

A few quick lift rides and a few minutes drifting down zero-g hallways led Lex to the employee entrance at Blake's. The civilian sections of The Upstairs were situated at the outer rim of long, rotating rings that provided the sensation of gravity. The service tunnels and other nuts and bolts sections were stuck wherever they were needed, and thus ranged from almost normal gravity to microgravity. Blake's was one of the places with no gravity at all, and it served his purposes just fine. Between moving heavy equipment around and having to interact with naked space so often, zero-g was more of a convenience than an annoyance.

"Hey, Lex!" Blake said, tapping at a pad tethered to his wrist as various jump-suited employees drifted about their daily tasks around him, "Fresh from the chauffeur job?"

"Not exactly fresh, but yeah. You said you needed me to get Betsy out of here for a few days, right?"

"Yeah, just for a few days. The ships are already coming in. I guarantee I'll need the dock."

"No problem. I have to take a trip around the corner anyway. You had that delivery for me?"

"It is in the storage locker outside your airlock."

"Thanks loads, man. I just got a decent payoff. You sure you don't want any money for this?"

"Just make sure you get your ass up here if I get someone looking for race tuning. No one I've got does it half as good as you."

"That's because you're too busy taking instrument readings to actually listen to the engines, Blake. Listen to what she says, she'll tell you what she wants."

"Whatever, Lex."

Another few corridors of weightless coasting brought him to the airlock that led to his delivery ship, 'Betsy.' The name didn't have any deep meaning behind it. The ship needed a name, and it seemed like a good one. He swiped his pad over the door's mechanism and fetched his package. It would be a minute or two before the access way was pressurized, so he drifted over to the view window to admire the vessel. One of his lingering fans wandered over and glanced out.

"THAT'S your ship?"

"Yep!" Lex said proudly, "Why so surprised?"

"I don't know, I was expecting something... sexier."

"Hey, hey, hey. It isn't a pleasure cruiser. This baby is built for speed."

Betsy wasn't much to look at. It had at one point been a Cantrell Aerospace Intrasystem Interceptor. One step above police, one step below military, the CAII (or CA2I, or CA double I, or Kai, depending on who you were) was once the ship of choice for chasing down smugglers, but that was many years ago. Ironically, or perhaps inevitably, they'd become the ship of choice for smuggling just as soon as they'd started to show up on the used market. It wasn't well favored for either, these days. There were faster alternatives. He'd found this one in a salvage yard and picked it up for next to nothing. Then he'd gone to work on it. A pair of engines from a second scrapped CA2I were grafted onto the rear along with a pair from something he hadn't been able to identify. Stuck between the two massive banks of engines was the power plant from a full sized freighter. The result was a ship that was about 85% propulsion system. It was a stack of engines with a place to sit. Not pretty, not graceful, but FAST.

"She might have a little junk in the trunk," he said, pointing to the preposterous cluster of engines, "But that's the way daddy likes it."

"It looks like crap."

The access door hissed open. Lex drifted inside, looking back.

"You don't bet on the best looking horse, you bet on the fastest one," he said.

"Who bets on horses?"

He climbed into the cramped cockpit, stowed the client's package and his own, and pulled the backup flight suit from the storage compartment.

"You're clear for departure, Lex. Take the long way around," squawked Blake's voice over the com, "And if you're going to get changed, please don't do it until you're out of the damn hanger this time."

Lex looked out of the view window to see Blake in the control tower halfway across the dock, microphone in hand and looking irritated.

"The tint isn't on?"

His jacket and shirt were already off.

"The tint is broken, remember?"

"Clearly I don't."

"Just get out of here."

"Fine. I'll be back in two, two and a half weeks. That cool?"

"Yeah, sure. We'll be cleared out by then."

"Righto, buddy. See you then."

The engines purred to life at a touch of the control panel and he maneuvered the ship out of the dock and into an exit pattern while he worked out the path he'd be taking. It wasn't an easy task.

You see, space is extremely big and mostly empty. Those two little adverbs, extremely and mostly, are the key words. The 'extremely' comes in when you realize that even light, which for most of history was the fastest thing in existence, takes years to get from star to star. Since then science had one-upped mother nature, as it tends to do, but finding the shortest and quickest path is still a big concern in space travel. No problem, though, right? Just draw a straight line between where you are and where you want to be, scoot around any stars or planets that get in your way and you are set, right?

Well, unfortunately, that's where 'mostly' comes in. Space is mostly empty, but then, a shotgun blast is mostly empty, too. That doesn't make it any less dangerous. There are all sorts of things drifting in the vast interstellar wastes. Micro meteoroids, variable density gas and dust clouds, and for the last few hundred years, human beings sealed in glorified tin cans called space ships. Sure, you probably won't hit anything, but when it involves the life and livelihood of untold thousands of passengers, not to mention the freight workers and the planets they supply, 'probably' doesn't cut it. The only remotely safe way to keep people from smacking into each other is regulation. Air traffic control on a galactic scale. Flights are scheduled, routes are designated.

These designated routes aren't just lines on a map. They have to be monitored and scanned. If an asteroid wanders into a trade route filled with ships moving at ten times the speed of light, it would be catastrophic. By the time physics allows anyone to see it, it will already be several hundred

thousand miles behind them, having passed through the hull along the way. Monitoring a thread of space of any reasonable length takes a phenomenal amount of resources. Expecting every separate transportation firm to do so individually is ridiculous, so most routes are the result of a government sanctioned monopoly.

The biggest of the companies that regulated space travel was VectorCorp, a gargantuan telecommunications and transit corporation that had exclusive rights to most of known space. They ran communication and shipping, and manufactured half of the devices that made use of the communications and shipping. In order to keep the inevitable trespassing and piracy under control, they'd managed to become a substantial paramilitary presence as well, along with a producer of the arms and vehicles that went along with that status. The only thing that kept them from being the only game in town was a swath of space that neatly sliced the colonized portion of the galaxy in two. This hunk of the cosmos had sold its rights to either Rehnquist Intercom or JPW. Neither company was even half the size of VC, but they'd banded together to make sure that not a speck of usable space wasn't owned by at least one of them. The fact that you had to pass through their space to get to the other side of the galaxy meant that VectorCorp had to buy time and pay fees if they wanted end to end service. It was pretty clear that the income from VectorCorp's licensing was the only thing that was keeping these companies afloat.

As is the case with all local monopolies, there is no competition, so they are free to charge whatever they want. Sure, the government makes enough of a stink to keep the price within reach of the middle class, but you are still at the whims of the corporation. If you disagree with their policies, or you can't afford the price, or you require a degree of discretion that doesn't fall in line with their terms of service then, officially, you are out of luck. Unofficially, there are alternatives for those not too choosy about speed or legality.

That's where Lex and other freelancers came in. They were willing to carry packages to and from just about anywhere you might want them to for the right price. Depending on the individual and the start and end points, they might even get it there faster than the official methods. This was because they, as a rule, couldn't use the main routes. The main routes belonged to the big corporations, and you couldn't fly them without their blessing and paying their licensing fees. Freight was one of their biggest sources of income, so you better believe they weren't letting anyone else deliver using their routes without coughing up. This forced freelancers to use more direct courses. It also forced them to risk getting blasted to pieces by nearly invisible debris and the speeding ships of other freelancers, since the space was barely mapped and completely unmonitored. Well, not completely unmonitored. Regular patrols of corporate ships swept the more useful chunks of space to try to weed out the riffraff, but the sheer size of the area involved made it rather hit or miss.

The better freelancers took a hybrid approach to their deliveries. Standard

operating procedure called for a dead sprint toward a star system or asteroid cluster. Then drop down to conventional speeds to weave through it. Anyone tracking you on sensors would more often than not lose you among the other ships and space rocks. Anyone following you directly would have to slow down and take the same route. At that point it was just a test of who was the better pilot, the very fact that attracted Lex to the business to start with. While they are tied up in whatever mess you picked to hide in, you gun it to the next thicket. The popular parlance had dubbed it "Sprints and Jukes." It was like a needle hopping from haystack to haystack.

Right now he had to find the right haystacks and the paths between that didn't intersect corporate space, wouldn't get him killed, and WOULD get him to Tessera V in six days. It didn't leave much room for error. He tapped and swiped his way through the various stellar maps, downloaded some fresh data, and pushed the whole mess into his flight computer. Before long he'd found a crooked, zigzag path that seemed mostly survivable, and set a course for the first sprint. All that remained was to make it out of the cluttered star system before shifting to FTL speed. He took the opportunity to finish getting out of the monkey suit and into the flight suit. It was just a reinforced and airtight jumpsuit with sealed boots and gloves, but aside from being marginally more comfortable, it could couple with a helmet and keep him from popping like a ripe tick in the event of a sudden change in cabin pressure. That sort of thing was a bit more intense in deep space.

He managed to finish the uniquely awkward dressing maneuver just in time for the autopilot to kick into FTL. One would think that such a thing would be spectacular. Not as such. The inertial inhibitor wiped out any semblance of the sensation of speed. No lurch backward, no pressing into the seat. It had to, or the pilot would be a thin film of organic matter long before the ship even made it to half the speed of light. And as for the sights? Well, everything in the view field took an abrupt shift toward blue, then violet, and then on up into ultraviolet, then into the various levels of high energy radiation, which was summarily blocked by the ship to prevent, among other things, death. Some pilots used view screens that would drop the radiation frequency down to viewable levels, probably the same sort of people who get a kick out of listening to bat sonar. They would get a groovy stretched out light show that, in reality, was a long way behind them. Lex preferred to nap or poke at a casual game on the slidepad until he reached the first stop.

Back in the skies over Golana, an aging but well kept ship, military in design, was maneuvering to dock with a communications pylon. In an earlier age it might have been called a satellite, and in truth that's all it was, but when things become commonplace, people find the need to come up with more specific names. Just as cars would come to be called coupes and convertibles and roadsters and hatchbacks depending on their shape, satellites earned descriptions like pylon or wheel or hub. Com-pylons had taken the place of

cell towers once humanity had developed the need to stay connected on a globe-to-globe scale. Hand held or vehicle mounted devices would communicate to a pylon. From there, small bundles of quantum entangled particles would, with a little super-scientific prodding, transmit data via their matched pairs over virtually any distance instantaneously. Pylons scattered along all mapped transit routes meant that any slidepad in mapped space could communicate with any other one, given enough hops.

The quantum communication, aside from thumbing its nose at relativistic physics by transmitting information faster than the speed of light, was subject to the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. Physicists liked to define this with fancy equations that featured letters from three different alphabets, but to the layman it meant that it was impossible to observe the data without altering it, thus making the communication absolutely secure as long as the connection was direct. Any wireless steps or repeater relays spoiled the effect by at least briefly requiring it to be decoded to a less secure form. Thus, if you were the sort who required utter secrecy, you needed to dock directly, and very few had access. This man was among them.

Fingers tapped out a long sequence of digits on an access screen, then swiped their prints for authentication. A screen read off a list of connection steps. A moment later, a voice crackled across the com speaker in the ship.

"William Trent," said the voice, a terse introduction that managed to communicate with remarkable clarity how much of a waste of time he considered the call to be.

"Agent Fisk reporting. I found the leak," said the mysterious ship's pilot.

"About time," Trent barked.

"There's a problem," warned Fisk.

"What is it?" fumed Trent, murder in his tone.

"It may not have been contained. I did a trace on network activity. She did some research. Freelancers."

Fisk spoke in short, precise bursts, like machine gun fire. He delivered exactly what information needed to be delivered with the sort of efficiency you only get in soldiers and butlers.

"Damn it!" Trent replied.

"Narrowed it down to one. Found surveillance of a hand-off. Package contents unknown. It looks like he is off planet already."

"Find him. Get it back. This doesn't get any farther. Not now."

"What about her?"

"If she sprung one leak, she can spring another. We can't have that. Take care of it."

"What level of authorization do I have in this matter?"

"Take. Care. Of. It."

"Acknowledged."

The communication was severed. Fisk pulled away from the pylon and pulled up his surveillance notes. His primary target had a short trip to a

neighboring star system planned that day on a commuter shuttle. That would be simple enough. Some collateral damage, but no trail to follow. As for his new secondary target, the freelancer... That might require a more personal approach.

Seven hours, forty winks, and twelve thousand colored bricks later, the view outside the window made the slide back toward red and into visibility. It wasn't the destination. That would be the better part of a week and a few dozen jumps away. This was just the interstellar equivalent of a strip mall, close enough to a VectorCorp route that even a damaged ship could limp to it from there, but far enough that there was no chance of being forced to pay licensing fees. Lex liked to make at least one or two stops in a place like this along the way. They had real bathrooms and real food. The same could not be said of his ship, which made do with... substitutes.

The bathroom was replaced with a bedpan sized contraption officially called a waste reprocessor, but more familiarly dubbed a turd burner. It converted human byproduct into a chemically pure compound that could be dropped off for processing into explosives or fertilizer or some such. More importantly, it didn't stink and took up less space. Food came in the form of whatever preservative-ridden, vitamin-fortified, partially hydrogenated, high calorie snack was on sale when you ran out last time. Currently it was something that claimed to be pepperoni protein bars and tasted vaguely like spicy sawdust. It wasn't difficult to understand why food cooked on a griddle and a bathroom with actual toilets would be nice before a week of travel.

Like most small space stations, this place was shaped like a massive wagon wheel, spinning fast enough to give the approximation of gravity. Lex hailed the landing coordinator and negotiated a spot in one of the docking ports along the inside rim. All he had to do was get in the same ballpark as the dock and tractor beams did the rest of the work. In no time the hiss of artificial atmosphere let him know that it was safe to open the hatch and head inside.

There – along with a couple of convenience stores, hardware stores, and repair shops - was a greasy spoon. That would do just fine. He took a seat and waved over the waitress behind the counter. She had the sort of dead eyed gaze that made it clear that she wasn't the talkative type, so he pointed out the three egg special on the menu.

"Over easy," he said.

The eggs were in front of him quickly enough to make him wonder if they were someone else's order, but that suited him fine. While he shoveled them down, Lex decided to take advantage of the high bandwidth data connection advertized on the menu to pull down some messages and entertainment for the trip. He activated his slidepad's wireless, loaded up his download queue, and slipped it into his pocket to wait for it to finish. Five minutes later, barely six gigs of data had been pulled down.

"High bandwidth my ass," Lex muttered, mopping up the remains of his

eggs with the remains of his toast, “Hey, you guys take chips, right?”

The surly woman behind the counter shook her head slowly and continued scraping at the griddle.

“I see. Then we’ve got a little problem, because that’s all I’ve got,” he said.

She thrust a finger toward the opposite side of the establishment, where another patron was just finishing up with a video poker machine. If casino chips were the new cash, poker kiosks were the new ATMs. He sat down and plunked a few of the tokens he’d been paid as advance into the machine. All he really needed to do was cash out his winnings into his bank account, but he always played a few hands, just on the off chance that a flush would make breakfast free.

His slidepad chirped just as he’d failed to get jacks or better for the third straight time. He dug it out with one hand while pulling up the cash-out menu with the other. Once the credits were in his account, he looked at the notification bar. It was mostly increasingly angry bill collectors, but one message was from someone with the screen name NixMix66Six. He tapped it, expecting spam.

“Trevor, Get back to me.”

It was a voice only message, but the voice was vaguely familiar and conjured a fairly specific image. It was the clipped, nasally voice of a woman who thought a lot more of herself than anyone else did. Normally Lex didn’t want to deal with those types. His agent had been one. His lawyer had been one. Neither had served him particularly well when the going got rough. But she’d called him Trevor. People who wanted money or to put him in jail called him Mr. Alexander. Most everyone else called him Lex or T-Lex. The only people who called him by his first name were those who knew him through family or Michella.

“Six eighty-five,” said the lady behind the counter, as he walked past.

“Hey, so you can speak,” Lex quipped, sweeping his pad over the paypad built into the counter, “We’ll call it an even thousand. Remember me next time, will you?”

It was a good policy to make yourself known as a big tipper in places like this. You never knew when it would come in handy. He made the customary trip to the restroom, which turned out to be filthy enough to make the turd burner downright attractive by comparison. From there he made his way to the docking bay. He tossed the attendant some money for fuel and climbed back inside. The message from NixMix had come in only twenty minutes before he’d arrived. It was probably a safe bet he could get her if he tried. After a few moments of considering it, he shrugged and pulled up the contact info. The connection negotiated for a few seconds, and he was connected. This time it was a video feed that answered.

She was a woman in her late twenties, hair streaked with hot pink highlights. A stud graced one nostril, and a handful of rings perforated one

ear. Her clothes ran the gamut from black leather to pink vinyl to white latex, along with virtually any other material but cloth. It was all layered over each other in haphazard flaps and pleats and held on with too many buckles and zippers. The overall effect was hideous and unusual, standard uniform of the pathological non-conformist. She was slightly overweight and, from the looks of it, very pissed.

"Oh, you," Lex said flatly.

Evidently NixMix66Six was Michella's older sister Nicole. In most families it was the youngest or the middle child that was the rebel. In the Modane clan, it was the oldest. Nicole was the kind of person who spent most of a given conversation trying to convince you why your every action was the result of brainwashing by a few dozen different sinister Powers That Be and Corporate Manipulators that wanted to tell you how to live your life. The rest of the conversation consisted of her telling you how to live your life. She'd always hated Lex, and the day Michella had dumped him was the happiest day of her life.

"That's right, me, you little sh-"

"Thanks so much for calling, Nicole. Do keep in touch," he said, reaching to end the call.

"No, wait, it's about Michella!"

"… Okay, what?"

"She told me you were working with organized crime again. Is that true?"

Lex sighed angrily, "Not that you'll believe me, but no. Like I told her yesterday, I gave Nick Patel a ride and he gave me a massive tip. That's it. Why the hell would YOU call and ask that?"

Now it was her turn to sigh.

"Have you been out with anyone since her?"

"I've had a fling or two."

It was exactly two, but she didn't need to know that.

"She's been with eleven. Most of them don't get past the second date."

"Well, she's winning, then, isn't she?"

"It is because of you, you asshole. She isn't over you."

"Well she could have fooled me, Nicole. The only time she spoke to me in the last two months was to dump me again."

"You hurt her pretty bad, Trevor. She loved you. After you got mixed up with the mob it tore her up, but it didn't change anything. You should hear her whenever she visits. Last week she was talking about how you had this really down to earth job and how you were working another one on the side. She was thinking of getting back together."

"She'd said something about keeping track of me. How much does she actually know?"

"Plenty. She's been watching you pretty close."

"… That's creepy."

"Then that mobster thing happened and she came crying on my shoulder.

I had to see if you were really that big of an idiot."

"Well I'm not. And what's the big deal anyway?"

"Have you ever heard of Carlito Rodrigo?"

"No, who was that? Lucky boyfriend number seven?"

"Look him up, asshole."

With that, she closed the connection.

"The whole effing family is out of their minds!" Trevor muttered through clenched teeth. He took out his frustration on the control panel, hammering the buttons to disengage and set the course for his next sprint.

Frustration and concentration don't mix very well. A man who gets angry tends to forget things he would never forget otherwise. The bad news was that getting a ship set for an FTL sprint wasn't the sort of thing you could afford to forget to do correctly. The good news was that there were all sorts of safeguards in place to prevent you from forgetting to do something you are supposed to do, so Lex didn't manage to get himself killed. Unfortunately there isn't anything to remind you to do things you aren't supposed to do.

Every ship is required, by law, to have a transponder broadcasting a unique identifier. It gave rescue crews something to home in on if you ended up adrift and radio silent. It also gave the authorities something to track. Thus it was a handy thing to turn off if you were going to be doing something of questionable legality. But with no useful reminders, and an awful lot on his mind, he forgot to reach under the dash and do the magic knock that would switch it off. And so Lex streaked off into the black depths of space, his transponder blaring his location out, loud and clear.

Chapter 5

The sprint was supposed to be a 9 hour stretch, so Lex had set his alarm and decided to catch up on his sleep. Just under 8 hours later, a loud beeping noise jarred him awake. It wasn't the alarm. At least, not the one he'd set. Most of the things sensors rely upon are far too slow to do any good when a ship is moving faster than the speed of light. Gravity was on the short list of things that weren't. It wasn't that it was fast. It is just that it is always there, tugging and pulling at everything else in the universe. The gravity sensor was used in FTL to let you know when something moving about the same speed as you was getting too close. Handy for ships in established routes to keep from bumping into each other. It shouldn't ever make a peep during a sprint. As such, when it started blaring, it had his attention.

"What the hell?" he said, groggily brushing the sawdust wrappers off the console.

He fiddled with some settings just to be sure, but there it was, a dot on the navigation overlay with an approximate distance and an approximate mass. It was a ship, it was behind him, and it was getting closer.

There were only two things it could mean. It could be another freelancer. It wasn't. No freelancer stupid enough to stay on someone else's tail that closely would live very long. That only left the far less pleasant possibility that someone was purposely following him, and that meant The Law. Probably a VectorCorp security patrol, but there was no way they could have found him. He took precautions. The only way that he could have been followed is if he'd managed to come close enough to a couple of their marker pylons for them to plot a speed and heading from his transponder code, but for that the transponder would have to be active, and there was no way he was stupid enough to...

"Son of a bitch..."

He rapped on the dash and the transponder light winked off.

"Okay... okay," he muttered to himself, "Should have done the curved sprint this time. That would have shaken this guy. Too late for that. No big deal, no big deal. forty-five minutes to the next stop. He can't do squat to me until then. Then I just bob and weave, standard juke, then do a curved sprint to a secondary stop, and that's that. Piece of cake."

He began to sift through the nav computer. A curved run at FTL speeds was generally ill advised. There was no real reason for it when you could just as easily and much more safely do two straight ones. A decent turning radius at that speed would practically be measured in parsecs, and plotting a course was immeasurably trickier. The one upshot was that a calculated trajectory like the one this guy must have followed would pretty quickly be millions of miles off course. That meant that if he could lose him just for the few seconds preceding the jump, he'd be home free.

His eyes flew over the stellar maps. If he'd known he was going to be

pulling a turn, he would have chosen a different starting point. The area was fairly thick with VectorCorp trade routes, and of the places he could squeak through, most didn't lead to anything that would be even remotely effective for evasion if he was followed. Eventually he dug up a route that might work, and plugged it into the computer. There were three minutes left before he would drop out of FTL and try to shake the pursuer. Nothing to do but wait and try to piece together what information he had.

The ship on his tail was lighter than his, and faster. That was difficult to achieve. It wasn't like you could make a space ship more aerodynamic to give it some extra speed in space. In the absence of an atmosphere a brick flew just as well as a dart. The only things that mattered were power, mass, and cooling. Betsy had a power to mass ratio that was off the charts, and the sheer size of the engines allowed for pretty decent heat dissipation, too. That meant his adversary had the money to invest in a more efficient set of equipment, which pretty much confirmed it was corporate security.

Knowing that, there were only three ships that he could be flying, and the weight class narrowed it down to one. This guy was flying a Delta Astro-Recon, a DAR, and probably a military edition at that. Light, fast, maneuverable. He dug unto the pouch of his flight suit, pulled out a stick of gum, and popped it into his mouth. The final seconds ticked down, the beginnings of color already starting to shift down into visibility in his view window. A grin came to Lex's face. This was going to be fun.

The universe came roaring back. A glittering star field opened up before him, a red star nearby, and around it a brown haze. The inertial dampeners switched to a lower power, pushing Lex forward into his harness. Sensors winked back into operation, instantly screaming proximity alerts, with a special focus on the ship that had overshot him by a few thousand miles. Considering the fact that they were both going a high multiple of the speed of light, a few thousand miles too far along was damn near surgical precision. It also placed him right between Lex and where he needed to go. This guy was either very lucky or very, very good.

"Attention, pilot of the... Of the unauthorized courier vessel," squawked a voice over his com system, "This is Senior Asset Protection and Loss Prevention Specialist Agent Emanuel Fisk. You will adjust course to one eight mark four seven and match speed. You will then remand all packages to my custody and accompany me to the nearest VectorCorp-"

"I'm going to interrupt you right there, Mister way-too-long-title. I am not in VectorCorp space, and you have no way of knowing if I do or do not have a package, and certainly not if I'm delivering it professionally without a VectorCorp permit. You and I have nothing to talk about. You have no authority out here."

The ship had done an about-face and was coming at him head on. It was becoming visible as a faint red gleam. Sure enough, the sensors identified it as a DAR.

“Well then, I suppose I’ll have to do this off the books,” said Agent Fisk, an edge in his voice.

Another warning bleeped.

“Uh... Agent, are you aware you are weapons hot?”

The answer came as a bright stripe of violet light slicing across the space between them. Lex banked hard and cranked the engines, sweeping around the streak of plasma and accelerating toward Agent Fisk’s ship. Betsy was a runner, not a fighter. Some freelancers flew fairly well armed ships to fend off pirates and the like, but Lex had never run into anything he couldn’t fly his way out of, so he hadn’t bothered to bolt on a single weapon, and his shields were strictly for navigation. If he was going to get out of this intact, he’d need to employ tactics.

Another salvo of plasma launched at him and he flitted underneath it, dialing up the speed and closing the gap between himself and Fisk. DARs were lousy at frontal assaults. Actually, that wasn’t entirely true. They were excellent at frontal assaults, but they were absolutely invincible at everything else. An arsenal of tracking and homing weaponry made them a sure thing in a close pursuit, and any number of long range armaments made them lethal at a distance. In a game of chicken, their homing stuff wouldn’t have enough time to lock on and get on target before they went roaring past, and the heavy stuff would be too dangerous to use without the risk of getting both ships caught in the blast radius. So it was all ahead full and see whose nerves gave out first.

“I would hold still if I were you. I’m supposed to disable you, but it wouldn’t break my heart if one of these shots hit life support,” crackled his voice on the com.

The distance dropped quickly enough for Lex’s navigation system to start screaming warnings about impact danger. He ignored it, keeping his eye on the approaching ship. It was close enough now for him to make out some details on the visual scanner. It was old, one of the first model years of the DAR. There were signs of wear, but no signs of damage or repair. That implied that this guy hadn’t done a lot of fighting... or at least he hadn’t done a lot of losing. The ship was more or less stationary, taking slow, deliberate shots with its plasma cannon. They were impeccably aimed, and came heart-stoppingly close to connecting. A weapon like that wouldn’t destroy Betsy outright, but she certainly wouldn’t be going anywhere in a hurry. Unless it hit the cockpit. That would wipe out the controls and, more importantly, the pilot. Lex focused on dodging.

“Listen, Mister Fisk. I’m on a nice little stroll through space. If your ship just happens to be occupying some of that space, well, that’s your own fault. And my ship weighs a lot more than yours, so who do you figure comes out on top in that situation?” Lex taunted.

When something is moving toward you at truly high speeds, it can play tricks on the eyes. Particularly in space when there isn’t anything nearby to

serve as a reference point, things that are far away don't seem to move at all, regardless of their speed. Beyond a certain distance they seem to be a speck creeping along at a leisurely pace. Then at some magical point it appears to close the remaining space in no time at all. It isn't a well known phenomenon, since most of the people who experience it don't survive. Lex had seen it more times than he cared to recall, so he was ready for it.

The few hundred yards passed in a fraction of a second, but the trained reflexes of a racer stretched them out for ages. He tugged at the controls at the last possible instant, nudging the ship upward just as a final bolt of plasma launched at him. The projectile passed near enough that Lex could hear a crackle of interference as it brushed his meager shield. A tenth of a second later the enemy ship dodged downward, but Lex adjusted to follow. If he was going to have a chance at making it to the hiding spot he'd had in mind when he'd plotted this course, he would need to cut this close. Loud, urgent alarms informed him that impact was immanent. Finally he felt just the tiniest shudder of upward motion, his shields sliding across the beefier ones of the DAR. That was his cue. He punched the engines for all they were worth.

In a roar of white-blue light and a jolt of thrust, he let Betsy do what she did best: Haul ass. The flare of the engines belched out all manner of frequencies up and down the electromagnetic spectrum in one monumental blast. It wasn't technically a weapon, and it didn't last long, but at point blank range the EMP created from an oversized engine revving like that was more than enough to scramble the controls of even a well shielded ship like the DAR. Lex watched the sensor screen as his ship creaked and shuddered under the acceleration. The rear camera showed Agent Fisk drifting downward and slowly twisting in an awkward direction. It was a motion pilots liked to call "going belly up," a sure sign of instrument and control failure. For now, Fisk was dead in the water, figuratively speaking.

Lex had only had to pull that stunt once before, so as he headed for relative safety, he feverishly tried to work out how long he had before the heavily armed ship would be back on his tail.

"Okay, so he'll curse and try to figure out what happened for fifteen, twenty seconds. Then another fifteen or twenty seconds of fiddling with the electronics before he figures out he has to reboot to get them to come up clean. Then, say, thirty seconds for the systems to reset. So that's a good minute and a half before he..."

His calculations were cut short by a flash of blue on the ship in his rear viewer as the engines kicked back on. Evidently Fisk had skipped the cursing and fiddling steps, and the DAR was just a tad heartier than he'd given it credit for.

"Congratulations, Mr. Alexander. No one has been able to rev me out in years. But you're not the only one with EMP," the agent's voice muttered out of the cockpit speakers.

"Shut up, Fisk!" Lex growled.

"Missile lock detected," chimed the soothing computer voice.

"Shut UP, Betsy!"

The rear viewer painted a flashing yellow dot on its screen with a distance that was ticking down a bit too quickly for comfort. Ahead, the brown haze around the sun was beginning to look a bit more granular. It was one of at least seven different asteroid clusters that had earned the nickname "The Briar Patch" from local astronomers, evidently because local astronomers weren't the most creative lot. It was relatively new, astronomically speaking. A few hundred thousand years ago it was probably a pair of planets that got too close, and a few hundred thousand years from now it would probably be one larger planet and a couple of moons. Right now it was a big, gooey ball of molten rock with a veritable playground of cooling asteroids around it. As asteroid clusters go it was almost cartoonishly dense. It was exactly what he needed to shake this guy long enough to make his escape. It was also just a little too far away to reach before the missile hit.

Lex glanced at the controls. The engines were at 98%. Thank god for that, plenty of overhead left. He cranked them up to 120%. The percentages, in this case, had to do with the heating/cooling balance of the engines. Running them at 100% meant that they were cooling off at the exact same speed they were heating. You could go over for a few minutes, provided you ran it at lower power afterward to let things cool off. It voided the warranty, but then, so did grafting on triple the number of engines. With the extra speed he earned just enough time to reach The Briar Patch.

As soon as the first of the chunks of former planet zipped by, he placed it between himself and the missile and dropped the engines to almost nothing. The weapon smashed uselessly against the faintly glowing space rock, its payload managing to cause little more than some digital static on the control screens. Fisk's ship came charging around shortly after it. Now came the fun part.

The scattered, red hot rock made tracking via nearly any type of sensor almost impossible. Infrared sensors were blinded by the sun and the molten masses, radio frequencies were hopelessly scattered among them, and at this distance visual was anything but easy. Lex cut it close to one asteroid, letting the gravity tug ever so gently before twisting and bursting his ship to another tight little cluster. He bounced back and forth, tiny bursts of engine sending him in sharp, sloping curves. To his credit, Fisk followed him into the mess. Most of the times he'd had to shake a security ship they gave up as soon as they lost sight of him, but this guy was willing to get his hands dirty.

He guided his nimble ship among the stones and did an admirable job of following Lex, but the former racer's path around the briar patch was utterly random and beyond reckless, crisscrossing the same space and coming close enough to some of the rocks to change their spin. It took better than five minutes, but finally Fisk was searching fruitlessly near the sunny side of the briar patch as Lex spat back out the dark side. He oriented his ship, selected

the course, and shifted to FTL.

As the view outside his window shot quickly past the point of visibility, he kept his eyes glued to the scanners. If Fisk was going to have any chance of catching him, he would have to get on Betsy's tail almost immediately. Two minutes went by with little more than a flicker on the screen, probably the agent taking an educated guess that would leave him light-years away. Lex leaned back and breathed a sigh of relief.

This was a short sprint, just a few minutes, so there was no sense getting comfy. He rattled through a list of things he would have to deal with thanks to this unplanned bit of excitement. It had left him a little off course, but that wasn't too much of an issue. Being a freelancer pretty much meant doing almost a whole trip on a route most pilots would consider wildly off course, so this was business as usual. The engines were running a little bit hot. They were back down to ninety-eight percent now, but he should probably run them at twenty or thirty percent for a while until they cooled off. That could wait until the FTL stretch was over.

One would think that if pushing engines too hard at conventional speeds was burning them up, moving faster than the speed of light would fry them in no time, but such was not the case. It was an aspect of space travel that Lex was never completely able to grasp. There was a field generator involved, he knew that much. It produced something called the Carpinelli Field, which partially shifted everything in the field's radius into an alternate dimension. There were different physical laws there, and the engines pushed along using those rather than stricter native laws. He'd heard it described as similar to how an outboard motor dips into the water to push a boat along. Of course, he'd also heard that the outboard analogy was an insultingly inaccurate oversimplification that ignored the more complex issues the Carpinelli Field overcame, like time dilation and the like. It was easy to remember, though, so it was the one he stuck with. Lex didn't care HOW it worked, just so long as it did. Plus, it had the bonus of allowing the same engines to do the work for FTL and conventional acceleration, so he only had to learn to tinker with one system.

The line of thought had drifted to the specific tinkering he had in mind when the universe began to assert itself again. When everything dropped down to the sort of speeds physics intended, he was approaching the orbit of a planet he didn't recognize. It hadn't been on the initial flight plan, after all, so suddenly seeing it show up was a little like waking up in a hotel room and forgetting you weren't home.

"Betsy? Remind me where I am."

"Entering the gravity well of Sigma Six. Colloquially known as Big Sigma. It is a-"

"That'll do, Betsy. The trash heap."

Lex didn't know the history of the planet. It should at this point be clear that he was not a man of penetrating curiosity. Trash heap, though, was

probably as close a description to the planet's actual role as any. It was visible on the viewer as a grayish blob. There was nothing wrong with the visual. The planet just looked like that. Junk of every size and description cluttered the orbital space in a shroud so thick it was difficult to make out the surface features. If nature had anything to do with it, that trash cloud would settle into a ring, clump together into a few moons, or come crashing down. Instead, something kept it spread in a uniform, jumbled layer of filth. It wasn't populated, but it did have some sort of salvage facility. That was probably what kept the junk cloud so fresh, a steady stream of haulers dumping wreckage from high orbit in exchange for a few spare credits, or just to avoid the fines associated with improperly disposing of hazardous waste. It was a testament to how cheap and easy interstellar travel had become that such a place was even conceivably worthwhile.

Lex took the ship in close, just outside the fringe of the junk cloud, and let himself drift along for a while, dumping heat from his engines and deciding what course would get him back on track the fastest. While he did, he flipped the slidepad back on to pull in his messages and net content. It finished almost immediately. Evidently the junkyard had a much better network connection than the diner. Go figure. He was still reviewing the list of news and messages when the computer blipped to let him know that another ship had entered the system. Probably one of the haulers with another load... Though it was awfully small for a hauler. In fact, it was just about the same size as-

"This is your second warning, Mr. Alexander," the voice of Agent Fisk droned.

"What the- How the- How did you find me?!"

As an answer, the Agent's face flicked onto the com screen. Video messages had to be authorized, but considering the fact that this guy had managed to find Lex with the whole universe to hide in, cracking some minor security didn't seem terribly impressive. The face that stared back at him was an intimidating one. He was built thick and muscular, dirty blond hair sheared into a military cut, the first few strands of gray beginning to thread through it. He had severe brown eyes, the kind you'd expect to see lining up the sights of a rifle in a firing squad. He wasn't smiling.

"I am a VectorCorp Agent. You are using VectorCorp Communications equipment and infrastructure. We know who you are. We know where you are. Always."

Lex looked at the little orange and white VC logo on his com system and palmed his face. It wasn't that he'd had a choice. There literally wasn't another company that would provide communication service where he needed it. It was just that he was stupid and cocky enough to flip his data connection back on so soon after a run in. Officially, they didn't monitor and track individuals via their transmissions, but officially they didn't fire plasma and missiles at people they didn't have any proof against either. Deep space was great at keeping things off the record.

"Third and final warning. Surrender your illegal package and be escorted to the nearest criminal processing facility to be fined and sentenced."

"Well, I guess I don't really have a choice, do I?"

The smart thing to do would be to give up and follow orders. True, he was not technically, at the moment, breaking the law. In the few minutes at the beginning of his flight when he was in VC controlled space he was, and in the final few minutes when he entered it again, he would be, but right now he was in the clear. They had no proof of the brief moments of criminality. Thus if he DID get away, though he would look suspicious as hell, there would be no legal action that could be levied against him. He considered his next course of action. The consequences of giving in right now would be a fine that would bankrupt him, a probable permanent suspension of his interstellar flight license and thus livelihood, and a black mark on his record. The consequences of trying to get away and failing were either a bigger fine and jail time, or else a fatal crash. Lex popped a fresh stick of gum in his mouth, cranked the engines back up, and dipped down into the cloud of debris.

Like he said, he didn't really have a choice.

It quickly became clear that navigating the mess of wreckage and trash was nothing like the Briar Patch a few minutes ago. There was literally no way to avoid hitting at least some of the smaller stuff. His weak shields were constantly glittering with their own little fireworks display as he jostled his way through clouds of gravel-sized junk. It was like flying through a hail storm, only the hail stones are made out of high density tungsten and moving at orbital speeds. Larger slabs ground against each other ahead of him, rebounding just enough for him to slip through.

If he'd had the brainpower to spare, right about now Lex would have been doubting the wisdom of entering this death cloud rather than just taking his sentence like a man. As it was, every spare cycle of his brain was busy plotting the trajectories of half a dozen hunks wreckage, trying to figure out if the gap between them would be big enough to squeeze through by the time he reached it. Normally this was the sort of thing a flight computer would do for him. Unfortunately they were designed to KEEP you out of situations like this, not GET you out of them. Thus, his very expensive, top-of-the-line nav system had decided the best course of action was to flash a seizure-inducing array of warning lights and blare out an annoying siren right when he most needed to concentrate.

Things only got worse the lower he went. The wreckage got bigger and more plentiful and the swarms of nuts and bolts got denser. The shields were now shimmering with a pretty much constant and uniform glow. He'd never seen them do that before. A moment later the glow abruptly stopped as the shield generator finally overloaded. Now the flash and sparkle of deflected debris was replaced with the slung-gravel clatter of metal on metal, little nicks and gauges appearing each place a fragment struck his ship. He should have been terrified, and a large part of him was. Another part, one tucked deep

underneath the sea of adrenaline and panic in his mind, was reveling in the thrill of it. Steadily the noise of the alarms and the flash of the lights started to fade into the background. Navigation slipped from his conscious mind to his reflexes. He found himself in a groove, a zen-like union of man and machine that he hadn't felt since his final days on the race track. He nudged himself deeper and deeper into the debris field, drawing closer to the atmosphere and its clear sky below. Amid the clatter and crash of detritus against his hull, there was a voice warning him to pull out, but he ignored it. There was nothing in the universe but himself, his ship, and the challenge ahead.

Actually, there was one more thing. A maniac VectorCorp agent firing plasma bolts at him from the safety of high orbit.

Chapter 6

That took him back to the start of the crash. It was either 58 seconds or 97 minutes since then, depending on your frame of reference. He'd watched a pair of additional plasma bolts drift by outside the ship. At normal speed they were just brilliant points of light that you tried desperately to avoid. From his current point of view they were fluffy purple-pink clouds that just happened to convert anything they touched into a cloud of vapor. None of them came close to hitting him before scattering against an orbiting lump of metal. That was nice, since the only thing his safety system would do was slow it down, and chances are that something that would melt his face off at a thousand miles per hour would still melt it off at ten.

The debris was behind him now. That was the good news. The bad news was that there were only a few seconds of timeshift left, and a hell of a lot of free fall. As the last hundredths of a second started to tick down, he made sure that everything he was going to need after the crash was strapped to his person. He clicked the seat harness off so that he could move around more freely, and went to work. The metal briefcase was the first to be locked down. If it had cost him his ship, he was damn sure going to get it there. It was a matter of pride now. The only other thing inside the bounds of the emergency shield was the box he'd picked up from Blake's. He couldn't quite remember what was in it, but he might as well bring it along.

He'd only just gotten it strapped on when time came charging back with a vengeance. It had been difficult to tell in slow-mo, but the ship had gotten itself into a pretty vicious spin. That presented a number of problems. First and foremost, he couldn't safely eject while it was spinning like that. There was a second consequence too, which he hadn't anticipated. The inertial dampener must have been hit at some point, because when time came back, it brought centripetal force with it. The rotation threw him out of his seat and pinned him painfully against the force field for a moment or two before he hauled himself back into the seat. He buckled himself back into the harness and made a mental note to never, ever unbuckle it during a flight again. He then pulled up the auxiliary controls and gave them a try. There wasn't a whole hell of a lot of functionality left in old Betsy. There might be one engine left that was still running and had controls intact. One or two of the maneuvering thrusters was still working, too. That would have to be enough.

A little of trial and error and an awful lot of finesse took the ship out of its death spin. The ground wasn't as close as he'd expected. Gravity must have been a little weak here. A little more fighting got the ship oriented generally upright, and the time came to say his goodbyes.

"Well, girl. We had some good times, but this is where we part ways," he yelled over the rush of wind and rattle of broken machinery, patting the arm of the chair one last time before hammering the eject button.

Nothing happened.

He hammered the button a few more times, because that's what you do when technology fails you. It had roughly the same result it always did. That is to say, none at all.

"Come on, babe. It's time to let go," he said nervously.

There was a groan of jammed clamps, then more nothing. The ground was getting a lot closer now. With very few options, and zero time to come up with anything intelligent, Lex was forced to desperate measures. He unbuckled again, reached behind the seat to snag his Extra Vehicular Activity pack, strapped it on, and grabbed onto the broken frame of his view window. Getting through the mangled mess of broken glass and twisted metal would have been tricky in any situation. Doing it with two bulky cases and a backpack, all while plummeting in a barely controlled nosedive added an extra challenge. One final heave tore him free and instantly he was caught by the wind and torn from the roof of his ship. Shaking fingers found their way to the panel of his EVA pack, and he activated its jets.

Jet packs were a fairly common thing these days. Engineers had not yet had any luck making them particularly safe, but they were cheap, fast, and exciting. In a way, they were the next logical evolution of motorcycles, and thus popular with thrill seekers. There were models that were capable of hours of flight time, the maneuverability of a bird of prey, and more than enough speed to give you windburn. This wasn't one of those. The jets on his back were the kind intended to move you around during a space walk. At full blast they had about as much thrust as a couple of garden hoses. Had his ship been disabled in space, like 99% of freelancer ships are, this little baby would have been perfect. In an atmosphere, with a planet pulling him down, it was next to useless. All he could do was keep the nozzles pointed down and blazing, and hope that their push and the planet's weak gravity would be enough to make the fall survivable.

Wind whistled past his helmet as he fell. The landscape drew closer and closer. As it did, he scanned madly for something that would break his fall. There was nothing. The surface of the planet was an endless gray moonscape, pockmarked with craters and scattered mounds of wreckage and slag. No convenient mound of cardboard boxes. No building with nice flimsy awnings. Hell, even though wispy clouds high up the sky suggested there must be rain at least occasionally, none of it had seen fit to accumulate into so much as a pond. The jet pack was slowing him down, but not quickly, and not nearly enough. If he didn't come up with an idea soon, he was going to splash when he hit whether it was in water or not.

Nearby, a wrenching metallic screech erupted as the mooring of one of Betsy's engines tore loose and she went into a series of screaming loops. At least he knew that abandoning ship had been the right decision. He watched the trusty vessel draw pale blue spirals in the air above him for a moment before tearing his eyes away from the sight to try again to find something that might slow his landing. There was a jagged peak below that dropped off into a

steep slope. With no better options available, and time just about up, Lex guided himself toward it. Jets worked a lot better if they had something to push off of. If he could match his descent to the slope, the additional lift might take him down to some velocity not likely to leave a crater.

The peak shot up beside him, and where there had only been icy sky there was now a sheer wall of stone, blurred by speed. Gradually he nudged himself closer to the wall, then turned his jets toward it. The exhaust washed against it and he felt his speed decrease, but he also was launched away from the wall. Again the nozzles adjusted, again he edged up to it, and again he lost speed and was hurled away. Lex managed to bob back and forth, slowing his fall each time, and it was starting to look like this might actually work. It probably would have, too, if the slope had remained steady for another three or four minutes of fall. Instead, it turned just a bit gentler and he misjudged a return, bashing against the wall and damaging the jet pack.

A moderately controlled decent turned into a sliding, rolling tumble down a mountain of gravel and debris. The flight suit he wore was a lot of things. It was made of high strength synthetic fabric that was air tight, water tight, flame resistant, and acid resistant. It was not, however, padded. Even in slightly reduced gravity and his reduced speed, the fall hurt. A lot. By the time he slid to a stop on a pile of sharp rocks, he looked like... well, like he had fallen down a mountain. He waited a few minutes until it no longer felt like he had been riding in a cement mixer for the last two weeks, then assessed his situation.

The trip down the mountain had left him about half way up a sloping mound of rocks at the base of the sheer wall, which for some reason he managed to remember was called scree. Evidently the fall had knocked some of his high school geology loose. At the base of the scree was a long, wide plain with scattered dips and dents, craters of various ages and sizes. Now that he knew where he was, in a general sense at least, he checked himself over. It didn't feel like there were any broken bones, amazingly. One particularly sharp stone had managed to puncture his suit and dig into his thigh. It was a nasty sight, but not too deep. His helmet had absorbed more than one potential concussion, and the clear visor was a spiderweb of cracks. Before he removed it, though, he had the presence of mind to check the environmental readout on his forearm. The gravity was 0.6g, the pressure was 0.9 atmospheres, and the atmospheric gas mixture was a little high on the methane and carbon dioxide, but breathable. Good enough.

A half second before he removed the helmet, he heard a familiar scream of ailing machinery. An instant later the out-of-control wreck of his ship came crashing to the ground a mile away. It skipped and skimmed toward him along the loose slope like a stone on a stream. Each time it touched down, a cascade of stones was slung aside. The old girl managed to get aloft one last time before the final active engine disconnected entirely, slicing into the sky like a javelin and dropping the rest of Betsy down into a cartwheel. Rocky ground

crunched beneath the wrecked ship as its roll took it directly at Lex. He spat a series of curses and gathered enough of his wits to make a mad lunge aside. The ship's momentum finally gave out, creaking it lazily up into a nose stand before pivoting and rocking to a rest on its belly. When the dust settled, Betsy had managed to come within five feet of turning her former pilot into a leaky bag of broken bones and flattened organs.

Between the pain and the amount of rattling his brain had done, Lex decided it would be prudent to sit still for a few minutes. He propped himself up against the wreck of a ship and let the specifics of his surroundings seep in. First off, it was cold. Very cold. Nothing life threatening, but every surface that hadn't been churned up by his crash was covered in a thin layer of frost. The flight suit was fairly well insulated, but the ripped section was letting the cold at the puncture in his leg, which wasn't terribly pleasant. As far as he could tell, it was daytime, too. The temperature might get dangerous when the sun went down.

That was the second thing that struck him. The sky was gray. Not the hazy, cloudy gray that you might see before a bad storm. There wasn't more than one or two clouds in sight. It was the sky itself that was gray. The color was very slightly granular, like hazy static viewed at a great distance. Here and there the sky twinkled and flashed. It took him better than a minute to realize that he was looking at that debris field from the other side. Vast clouds of metal blocked most of the sun's light, and the shinier pieces reflected the odd rays downward as they turned in orbit. No wonder it was so cold, most of the light wasn't making it to the surface.

The ground around him looked like a war zone. Deep gashes marked the landscape in thousands of places. Every few hundred feet there was another, giving the surrounding plain the look of a poorly made golf ball. Most of the divots were fairly shallow, maybe a dozen or more feet across, but some looked like they were a quarter mile or larger. A lot of them still had a very jagged, fresh look. Whatever was pummeling the surface of the planet didn't seem like it ever took much of a break... probably he should get mobile before the next impact.

He pulled out a roll of duct tape from its pouch in his flight suit and started binding up his injured leg. It may seem odd, but there was absolutely nothing more crucial in a space emergency than duct tape. Spare oxygen, emergency food, and weapons all came in handy, but if your suit springs a pinhole leak in a vacuum, all of the freeze dried ice cream in the world won't save you. As current circumstances proved, it made a decent field bandage in a pinch, too. With the hole in his leg sealed up, more or less, he decided to give it a test drive.

Standing on it hurt like hell, and walking hurt worse, but neither was so bad that it could distract him from the final noteworthy aspect of the crash site. In the distance was a dust cloud tracing its way along the ground, and it was moving quickly toward him. In less than a minute it was close enough for

him to make out the vehicle kicking it up, but he continued to blink and shake his head in attempts to focus more clearly on it for far longer. He popped the helmet off, letting the cold hit him like a slap in the face, in hopes that it would sharpen his senses somewhat. The icy air had a hell of a bite, and the sort of industrial stench that lingered around factories, but it didn't help much. What his eyes were telling him he saw didn't agree with what his admittedly mistreated brain suggested was likely. Finally, it was close enough that it couldn't be denied. It was a school bus, one of the earlier hover models that couldn't get more than a few feet off of the ground. It pulled up to him, came to a stop, and settled down onto rubber supports.

"Uh... I must have hit my head MUCH harder than I thought," he muttered.

The thing had seen better days. A faded yellow paint job bore black letters that read "Ruane Girls Academy." One headlight was completely missing, and the second looked like it had been replaced with one from a much larger vehicle. A flashing red stop sign flipped out from the side and the doors creaked open. A few seconds later the PA system crackled to life with a familiar voice.

"On the off chance that there is something alive at the crash site, I suggest you climb inside," said the same voice that had been cursing at him before the crash.

"Listen, I don't know who you are, but-"

The voice cut him off. "If you are looking for motivation, take a look at all of those craters. Then look up. That mess you came crashing through is none too stable on a good day. There are about two dozen impacts per minute, so if you haven't seen one, that means you're overdue. The chances of you getting hit are pretty low, but one of those hunks poking a hole in the planet tends to make the area inhospitable. Also, if you're outdoors come night time, I hope you brought a parka, since last night it hit negative forty."

"Uh... okay. But how do I know-"

"If you are dead, I'm going to salvage that ship, assuming there's any of it left. Hell, if you're alive I'm going to salvage it, too."

"Hey, that's MY ship you're talking about, you-"

"Also, in case you haven't figured it out, this is a recording. This is the only chance you're gonna get to partake of my hospitality, so I suggest you step aboard. Doors close in five... four... three... two..."

Lex hopped inside just as the doors closed. Regardless of who this guy was, or where this bus was headed, it couldn't possibly make his situation worse than it was now... Could it?

Chapter 7

The inside of the bus was as typical as the outside. Row after row of uncomfortable seats, windows that could barely open, and upholstery the color of mulch and chewed gum. The only significant difference was the lack of a driver in the driver's seat. Automated cars weren't outside the norm, these days, but they still stuck a driver in the school buses to supervise things. This one was puttering along all by its lonesome. He stacked the two cases he'd rescued on the seat beside him, elevated his injured leg, and leaned back to watch the scenery. As he did, he raised an eyebrow. Evidently there was one other difference between this bus and the standard one. The speed.

It may have looked like an old jalopy on its last legs, but the scenery was zipping by like he was in a top of the line speedster. The ride should have been a nightmare of bumps and jostles, too. The old hover buses weren't meant for off-roading, so they stayed pretty tightly coupled to the ground. With road surface that looked like the global pothole preserve, his teeth should have rattled loose by now. That meant someone had stuck an inertial inhibitor in this sucker, too. Lex had half a mind to take control of it to see how well it handled, but when he craned his neck to check out the driver's seat, he found that there were no controls to speak of. Just as well. He wasn't one hundred percent recovered, brain-wise. Getting behind the controls of an unfamiliar piece of equipment wasn't a great idea.

Instead, he just watched the landscape go by. In almost every direction there was nothing but more meteor-battered landscape. A bright red or white streak would drift down from time to time, kicking up a huge dust plume. Ahead of the bus, though, a cluster of three low complexes was approaching over the horizon. The craters were steadily increasing in density as they got closer, until finally, about two miles away, they stopped completely. A perfect ring of flawless gravel surrounded the buildings, which were clearly the destination.

There wasn't anything remarkable about them. They had the minimalist, boxy sort of architecture that industry and the military tended to favor. Simple, quick to build, easy to maintain. They were identical, about a dozen stories tall, maybe a few city blocks wide, and about a quarter mile long. They were arranged in a radial pattern around a massive circular landing pad, easily a half mile in diameter. Lining the roof of each building was the customary array of antennae and satellite dishes, along with a few rows of some sort of long, thin, articulated cylinder. They looked like telescopes, but it didn't make sense that there would be so many, and that they would be so big. While he pondered them, three suddenly repositioned, pointing at the same point, somewhere high in the sky. Then there was a flair of light, just for an instant, leading from the end each cylinder off into the sky. They were lasers, the light had been caused by the beams vaporizing whatever dust had been floating in their way.

So his host was the sort of person who kept a battery of lasers and fired them randomly in the air. That wasn't a good sign.

The bus slowed to a stop in front of the doorway of one of the three buildings. The door was in the center of the wall that faced the landing pad, and beside it the word "Lab" had been crudely spray-painted. The doors opened, letting in the icy air.

"End of the line. I was in the lab when I recorded this. I'm probably still there now. Busy. Just follow the green lights, but don't bug me unless I'm done," the recorded voice buzzed across the PA speakers.

Lex grabbed his things and limped down the steps of the bus. Once he was out, the door snapped shut and the bizarre vehicle whisked off toward one of the other buildings. The injured pilot eyed "Lab" warily. He wasn't terribly confident in the wisdom of entering a strange building on a strange planet after a surreal trip, but the alternative was sitting outside until the cold became lethal. He shrugged and stepped up to the door.

"Greetings, unknown person. You are new to this facility, please answer a few short questions before entry," said a female voice, or rather, several of them.

The speaker next to the door was clearly part of an automated system, but it had the characteristic screwed-up inflection and awkward pauses of a message assembled by slicing the words out of other messages. It sounded like the words had been sampled from announcements from at least three different people, all women.

"Please state your name."

"Uh... Lex."

"It sounded like you said... Alex... Is that right?"

"No. Alexander. Trevor Alexander."

"It sounded like you said... AlexanderTrevorAlexander," it droned, pronouncing the full name as one word and without pauses. The name was spoken in a fourth, clearly synthetic attempt at a female voice, "Is that right?"

"No. Trevor Alexander," he groaned through clenched teeth.

"It sounded like you said... Trevor Alexander... Is that-"

"Yes."

"Thank you, now please-"

"Listen, can I talk to a real person? Or at least a better computer?"

"Processing. I'm sorry, but the real person is busy doing very important things. And insulting the computer is not going to win you any friends," the voices said, somehow managing to sound petulant despite the comment being assembled from unrelated ones.

"Uh..."

The doors of the lab slid open and a green stripe illuminated along the wall of the hallway within.

"Please follow the green lights to workshop F. And you are officially on my S-list, Mr. Alexander."

Lex stood at the door, opening and closing his mouth as he tried to put his confusion to words. Finally, he shrugged.

"Why would things start making sense now?" he muttered.

After a single step past the threshold, it felt as though someone had dropped a load of sandbags on top of him. He staggered and leaned heavily on the wall to keep his injured leg from collapsing. A second later the doors hissed shut behind him and nozzles doused him liberally with a fluid that stung viciously, but evaporated almost instantly. The shock and awe of the assault left him dazed for a moment.

"Please brace yourself for artificial gravity and decontamination. Thank you," the computer said.

After he straightened up and shook away the notion that the computer had done that on purpose, he looked over the entryway. The inside of the building was as institutional as the outside, and extremely old. The lighting was provided by overhead hanging banks of bulbs, and it was the sickly yellow of fluorescent instead of the cool blue of LED. The floor was some sort of rugged plastic material, scuffed and marred with use and faded with age. Walls, ceiling, and floor were all one shade or another of neutral blue. Identical metal doors and large, reinforced glass view windows lined the walls on either side. The rooms were all filled with various tools and disassembled machinery on work tables, but there was no sign of people in any of them. In fact, there was no sign of people, period. No one walked the halls. There was no sound of conversation. Nothing but his own footsteps, the echoing growl of power tools somewhere further down the hall, and a pulsing green strip that traced along the tops of the doorways. It led to a workshop near a bank of industrial elevators. Inside was the source of the noise.

Splayed out on the work table inside was a carefully arranged layout of parts and tools. A hydraulic jack held what was certainly a piece of an engine, but Lex couldn't quite identify it. Whatever it was, there were lots of pipes, lots of tubes, and it appeared to be running, as the whole jack was humming and vibrating along with it. Working on the mystery component was a man in blue coveralls. He was focused intently on his task, his back to the door, and if he had noticed Lex's arrival, he hadn't acknowledged it. When Lex approached the door, it hissed open. He still didn't turn, reaching awkwardly across the table instead.

"Uh, hello. Are you the guy in-"

"Gimme that auto-spanner."

"O...K?"

Lex sidled painfully into the room and found the appropriate tool, handing it over.

The mechanic silently accepted it and went back to work.

"I recognize your voice. You were the one who was yelling at me when I was in the junk cloud. And you sent the bus. My name's-"

"In a minute. Gotta bleed this valve. Very important."

"What is that, a plasma manifold? You can't bleed a valve on one when it's running."

"Sure you can, you just need to time it right. See, watch."

Lex took a cautious step back as his mystery host started loosening fittings. The hunk of machinery started to stutter and vibrate, prompting the downed pilot to strap his helmet back on.

"See, you just twist here, three quarters of a turn. Wait for that to actuate, then loosen and-"

There was a short, sharp hiss. The room filled with a powerful scent of heat, ozone, and char, and the wall and ceiling received a spritzing of blood. Something pinged off of Lex's helmet and bounced across the room.

"Son of a- !" the mechanic barked in pain, clutching his left hand to his chest as he gingerly re-tightened a fitting with his right. "Forgot I changed the sequence."

"Oh God! Are you okay?"

"Nope, nope. No, I lost some fingers," he said quickly, holding up the afflicted hand.

It looked like he had tried to palm a grenade. There was blood seeping down his arm, and if there were any fingers left at all, Lex couldn't tell them from the rest of the mangled mess that remained of his hand.

"Give me a hand, would you?"

"Yeah! Yeah sure, of course! Oh, God. What do I do!?" Lex replied, panicked.

"I just told you. Give me a hand. They're in that box over there."

"Wh-what?"

"Never mind. Frickin' useless. Just look around for the fingers then. I used to have five. See if you can find two or three. I saw one go that way," he added, gesturing with the ruined nub, "And another over there."

Lex threw down his packages and tore off his helmet. Amid protests from his ailing leg, he dropped to his hands and knees and started searching for the missing digits. He found a thumb under the edge of a cabinet, and two more fingers near the door. He took a few more frantic glances, found nothing, and decided speed was better than thoroughness. The mangled mechanic was on the opposite side of the room now, flipping open the top of a large plastic crate. Lex hurried over.

"I couldn't find the rest! What do I do with these, put them in ice or something?!"

"Hmm? Oh, no. Just put them on that table there."

There wasn't any pain in the man's voice or features anymore. In fact, he almost seemed bored, rolling up the tattered sleeve to grasp his forearm and, with a few clicks and twists... remove the whole arm at the shoulder. He pulled a bin on the floor out with his foot and dropped the ruined arm inside. There were at least two other similarly chewed up appendages already in there. Then, from the freshly opened crate, he pulled a new arm.

“Hold that,” he said, thrusting it at Lex, “And follow me.”

Lex took the limb without thinking. Anger, disgust, confusion, and panic were all actively campaigning for time on his face. Confusion won. He stuttered and sputtered, trying to find the right words to adequately object to the situation, but his mind was not yet ready to be coherent. Meanwhile the mechanic rummaged through a drawer with his remaining arm until he found a pair of shears. He then cut the bloody sleeve off, revealing a complicated looking metal socket where his shoulder should be. Wordlessly, he took the arm from Lex, lined it up with the socket, and connected it.

“There, that’s that done,” he said, life quickly returning to the limb, and the appropriate color beginning to fade into its pale flesh. He brushed himself off, swept the fingers from the table into his pocket, and proclaimed, “Who’s hungry?”

Chapter 8

The pair had made it to the mess hall, just a few doors down, before Lex managed to kick his brain into gear.

"What just happened?" he asked.

"Well, I was trying to hot-bleed a custom plasma manifold valve on a Class A power module and I forgot I went with the 3-6-3 sequence instead of the 2-4-3," he said, matter-of-factly, while grabbing a tray and pushing it along the counter.

"And you blew your hand off."

"Well, I blew my fingers off, anyway. It happens all the time. Hence all of the spares."

"Spares. So it's prosthetic."

"I prefer cybernetic."

Lex nodded. After the crash, the strange bus, and the adventure in lost body parts, this cafeteria was the first halfway normal thing he'd had to deal with. Admittedly, the place was utterly deserted, but there was a counter with covered warming trays, and there were tables and chairs. That made sense. He took a tray, threw a plate and some silverware on it, and started pushing it along after his host. Now that he wasn't coping with a life threatening situation or an acid trip, his brain was willing to spend some time processing things. It started with the mechanic. He was one of those men who was hard to pin to a certain age. From the looks of him, he could have been anywhere from a worn out thirty to a baby-faced sixty. His voice had a generic urban quality, sloppy and a little hollow. Build-wise he was a little pudgy, but irregularly so. He had a slight paunch that didn't so much seem to be the result of overeating or laziness, but the kind of belly that accumulates like sediment over the years. He was maybe two inches shorter than Lex. His hair was salt and pepper black... but that's where things started getting unusual. A swath of his hair along the right side of his head looked wrong. It wasn't as fine as the rest, and was much shinier, like a doll's hair. Most of his skin was blotchy and pitted with neglect, but there were patches here and there that were baby smooth. Strangest, though, were his eyes. The left one was hazel, but the other was silver. That's not to say a fancy shade of gray. The whites were white, but the iris was actual, mirror finish chrome.

"Are you a human being or... what?" Lex asked.

"Karteroketraskin."

"Is that your..."

"Name. It's my name. It's been a while since I've had to deal with the whole social interaction garbage, but I'm pretty sure you were supposed to ask me my name."

"Oh, right. I'm-"

"Trevor Alexander. I know. You did the entry interview at the door. Good job pissing off the computer, by the way. I'm going to have to deal with that,

now."

"Okay. Well that's introductions out of the way. So... Are you a human or what?"

His host began to answer. As he did, he pulled the tops from steam trays and shoveled food directly onto his tray. He hadn't bothered to get a plate.

"Accurately answering that question is a non-trivial exercise in statistics, anatomy, physiology, and philosophy. As of my last medical scan, the standings are as follows: Thirty-nine percent original equipment, thirty-five percent aftermarket parts, and twenty-four percent synthetic organics."

"… That's only ninety-eight percent."

"I've got some bits on back order. So, the majority of my body is not human, but the plurality of it is, and that's good enough to win an election, so I'm going with human."

The mechanic finished piling up his tray, which now had a few pounds of red beans and rice and three burritos on it. After grabbing an extra burrito and tossing it into the pocket of his coveralls for some reason, he reached into a tray of ice and pulled out a can of some sort of soft drink. After checking a series of the steam trays and discovering that burritos, beans, and rice were the only things available, Lex helped himself.

"Where do we pay for this stuff?"

"Just eat. This is the smallest amount I can get the automated system to pump out."

"Oh, okay. Thanks. So what do you do here, Ketraskin?"

He answered with his mouth full, spraying rice irregularly, "Build stuff. Fix stuff. Blow stuff up. Various permutations of those concepts. Why the hell did you call me Ketraskin?"

"You don't like people calling you by your last name?"

"Last name's fine. You're calling me by the last half my first name."

"Your FIRST name is Karteroketraskin?"

"Yup. My full name is Karteroketraskin Onaserioriendi Dee."

"That's... a mouthful."

"People who can't deal with it call me Karter."

"I'm gonna go with that."

Karter grunted in reply.

"You can call me Lex."

"Lex? Your name is Trevor Alexander, and you want to be called Lex?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nicknames are the first half of your first name. Those are the rules. You can't just use a random part of your last name."

"What? No, nicknames are whatever someone calls you. I had a roommate nicknamed Tex because he always wore a cowboy hat."

"Tex was in violation of established nickname protocol."

"Everyone's entitled to their opinion," Lex said with a shrug, digging into the surprisingly tasty food.

"Pff," Karter scoffed, sending a volley of beans and rice Lex's way, "There's people who are right, and people who are wrong. Guess which one you are."

Lex looked at him flatly. "Anyone ever tell you you're an asshole?"

"It is a fairly common observation, yes," he said without a trace of apology.

"Look, it is pretty clear you don't want me around. So if you can just point me to someplace that can patch up my leg and someone that can lend me a ship, I'll be out of your hair."

"No."

"What request were you denying?"

"All of them. You are standing in the only someplace on the whole damn planet, talking to the only someone on the whole damn planet, and you aren't getting out of my hair any time soon."

"What are you talking about?"

"This is my planet. I'm the only one here. You want or need something, you get it from me. And you and whoever that was shooting at you stirred up the moat. There's no way anyone is getting in or out until the computer remaps the whole thing and plots when and where navigable gaps will occur."

"How long will that take?"

"Meh, forty hours or so."

"Whoa... No. No, no. I'm on a deadline. I've got a delivery to make."

"You probably should have thought of that before you blew up your ship."

"Karter, I'm serious. I've never missed a delivery date. Ever. In my business, it is all about reputation. And this is a high paying gig."

"I cannot put into words how much I don't care," he said flatly, "Listen, I sent the bus to pick you up because if you died here, someone would come looking for you, and I'd have to deal with that. I'm as eager for you to get the hell off of my planet as you are, but if you're going to be doing it, you'll be doing it in a loaner ship from me, and there is no way I'm letting you take one of my ships through the moat until I know there's a safe window. You want to get yourself killed, fine. But do it where I won't be inconvenienced, and don't do it in one of my ships."

"… Wow. Most people would be ashamed to show that degree of self interest."

"I don't have a whole lot in common with most people."

Lex fumed for a moment. He'd dealt with people like Karter before. They don't want anything to do with other people's problems. Usually, if you wanted something out of a person like that, you had to pay them, which he would probably afford to do... But screw that. This guy was a jerk. There was no way he was handing cash over to him now. Fortunately, self absorbed misanthropes were easy to manipulate. You just needed to make your problems into their problems, and they would spring into action.

"Well let me ask you this. As a man who is familiar with serious injury," Lex said, limping over to Karter's side of the table, "What do you think about this one?"

He peeled off the tape and opened up the torn leg of his flight suit, revealing gash in his thigh. Karter eyed it critically.

"Hmm. Yeah. That looks pretty bad."

"It does," Lex agreed, slightly nauseated by the growing bruise and the depth of the cut.

"Yeah. You're gonna need new panty hose."

"Huh?"

"I'll bet your ovaries hurt, too."

Lex narrowed his eyes and sneered.

"Fine, I'm a woman. But if I get an infection and die, you're going to have to deal with that, aren't you?"

"You aren't going to die," Karter said dismissively, "but if you're going to get your panties all in a bunch, we'll fix it up."

"Good. So there's a doctor or some-"

"Ma!" Karter yelled suddenly toward the ceiling.

Lex flinched at the sudden sound. "Your mother is here?"

"What? No."

"Please state request," echoed the computer's voices over the cafeteria's speakers.

"You named the computer 'Ma?'" Lex whispered.

"Please do not speak about me like I am not here," the voice reprimanded.

"Ma, pansy here needs medical assistance for his booboo," Karter jabbed.

"Processing... Processing..."

"What's taking so long?" Lex whispered even more quietly.

"She's trying to decide if she wants to help you or not. And she can still hear you."

"Yes. I can. A medical drone has been dispatched. Please hold still and await assistance," stated the voice.

A disconcerting whirring noise quickly approached from along the hallway. The doors opened and what looked like something that should be welding things together on an assembly line trundled into the cafeteria. It was a large industrial arm affixed to the end of a gurney. Splitting off from the main arm and hanging over the gurney like a chandelier was a wheel of smaller, spindly arms. Each was tipped with a different medical tool, and there were reels of gauze, needles, and tubes jutting from every possible location. Before he could object, or even react, Lex was maneuvered onto the gurney and restrained by a pair of arms that were clearly designed for the purpose. A laser line swept over him, lingering on the afflicted leg. Once it retracted, a clamp appeared from beneath the gurney to immobilize the limb. The wheel of tools hovered over the wound. An arm tipped with a syringe paused for a moment without deploying, then rotated to one that sprayed antiseptic.

A white hot, stinging pain seized Lex so hard that he couldn't even scream. He just made an agonized croaking noise and flailed every part of his body that wasn't tied down. By the time he recovered from the initial jolt of pain, separate arms had applied a trio of compounds that he couldn't identify. Pincers then deployed and pressed the edges of the open wound together, sending a fresh surge of pain through him. One of the things applied must have been some sort of medical adhesive, because the wound stayed closed. A waterproof bandage was then applied, and all restraints released. As a final slap in the face, the gurney dumped him onto the ground.

"What the- Seriously, what the hell!" Lex panted when he managed to get back to his feet.

"Oh. Did I forget to apply anesthetic? Perhaps if I was a better computer, that wouldn't have happened," the voice said innocently.

The drone withdrew as quickly as it came. After a few steps, Lex realized that the burning of the antiseptic and a bit of bruising when he pressed on it were the only lingering effects of the injury. The stab wound was completely gone. He'd always been vaguely aware that medical technology could pull that sort of thing off, but it came at a price. Only the very wealthy could afford it. If he'd managed to wreck during his fifteen minutes of fame, he might have gotten that treatment. Everyone else made do with more traditional recovery times. He glanced up from admiring the remarkable recovery to find that Karter was already on his way out of the cafeteria. Lex jogged to catch up.

Good heavens, he could jog already.

"That was incredible. Did you make that?" he asked.

"The medical probe? Hold on."

He stood still for a moment, eyes moving as if he was reading.

"I've agreed not to disclose that information for another three years," he said.

"… Isn't that just a yes?"

"It is a contractually obligated 'No Comment,'" he corrected, swinging toward workshop F again and stepping inside.

He picked up the auto-spanner, powered up the piece of machinery, and set to work on it again.

"You called this a class A power module? You meant D, right? Class A modules would take up this whole room."

"That's because most of the people making power modules are sucky quitters who give up on something after it blows a hand off once or twice."

"Sounds like a good policy to me."

"And that's why you've never invented anything worthwhile."

"It's also why both of my hands are still made of meat."

"I fail to see the allure... You know what?" he asked, a look dawning realization on his face, "You and I have almost opposite points of view."

"It certainly seems that way."

"This is good. This is an opportunity. Hang on a second."

Karter paced over to the edge of the room and pulled out something that looked like a hat rack on wheels. He lined it up in front of the module he was working on, hung a tool bag on it, then disconnected his arm and attached it to a similar socket on the stand. The whole process was as smooth and practiced as tying a pair of shoes. The arm flexed and tested its motion a bit, then grabbed something out of the bag and went to work.

"There. Now, you're probably not going to meet this delivery deadline, or whatever. And that's your job, so probably you're going to get fired. Which means you're going to need money, right?"

"If I get a move on soon-"

"AND YOU WON'T, so you're going to need money, right?"

"What are you getting at?" Lex growled.

"Follow me. I'm gonna show you some stuff I'm working on. The stuff I hit a wall with. The way I figure it, since your brain is orthogonal to mine, you might have the right perspective to get me unstuck. You focus group some of my dead ends and I'll pay you."

"Listen, I really don't have time for this. I've got to-"

"You've got … thirty-eight hours, nineteen minutes, and forty-seven seconds. Now come on."

Karter marched out of the room. Lex, with little choice, gathered up his things and followed a one armed man who wanted his help testing experimental devices. Surely this would end well.

Chapter 9

Karter and Lex stood in a stainless steel service elevator, silently waiting. The unstable host scratched at the socket where his arm should be, a vaguely distracted look on his face.

"So... what? The arm is running on automatic right now?" Lex asked.

"Wireless control."

"… So you're calibrating that thing blind?"

"There's a camera on it."

"… And where's the video-"

"It is being broadcast into my eye," he answered impatiently, "Look, let's get all of that out of the way first. I lost my left arm at the shoulder and my left leg below the knee in two different explosions. The arm's got a camera, it is wireless with a half mile range indoors and who knows how far outdoors, it can operate semi-autonomously, the hand has programmable fingerprints, a vibration motor, data interface capabilities-"

"Wait. A vibration motor in your hand? Why?"

"I'm a man, and I'm alone on the planet. Figure it out. Back to the prostheses. I was going to put wheels or something on the false foot, but then I'd keep busting my shoe, so basically the leg is just a leg. There's a storage compartment, though. The eye and most of the right side of my head got wrecked by a coolant leak. The guts of my ear are still natural, but the flappy part on the outside along with my scalp and eye are replaced. The eye has video recording and playback, heads up display, network connectivity, the works. Aside from that, most of my internal organs are either cybernetic or synthetic. No bells and whistles. I don't like to tinker with the vitals."

"Most of your organs? Seriously?"

"Yep. One kidney, my liver, both lungs, my heart, I don't even HAVE a gall bladder. I don't have an appendix, either, but I replaced it with an organ that synthesizes caffeine. The fact that I didn't have one already is a glaring evolutionary oversight, if you ask me. Then there's the spleen, the pancreas... Hell, in many legal territories, I don't count as alive. I'm on permanent life support. It just happens to be internal."

"Hang on. If your arm was cybernetic, why did it bleed?"

"Oh, that's the beauty part. All of the mechanical bits run on blood glucose fuel cells with battery backup. That way I don't have to worry about running wires and charging things and what not, but it wreaks havoc with my blood sugar if I try anything fancy. And if I don't remember to pump the blood back out of the limb before I remove it I start to get a little woozy. Gotta work on that."

The elevator gave a pathetic little plink and the doors opened. Immediately, Lex was hit by a number of things. For one, this area was much less antiseptic and lifeless than the rest of the facility. It was subtle, but there was a disorganization, a lived-in quality, that indicated this was where he

spent most of his time. Another interesting aspect was the almost museum-like presentation. The hall that greeted him was just as wide as those on the first floor, and was likewise lined with doors and display windows, but each one bore a lighted and labeled shelf. The shelves held rough, home-made looking devices surrounded with images, schematics, warnings, and manuals, all written in pencil. One thing thrust the rest of these observations aside and demanded to be addressed first. The smell.

It wasn't strictly a bad smell, but it certainly wasn't a good one, and there was a LOT of it. Lex didn't have anything in his mental tool kit to compare the odor to. It was definitely biological, but nothing you would find in a locker room or bathroom. Not a human one, anyway. Whatever it was, it seemed to lay low, slipping under the nose's radar until it got deep into the back, then asserting itself to the point that one could almost taste it. If Karter noticed it, he didn't let on.

"Welcome to the Hall of Rejects," Karter said with a magisterial wave of his arm, "It isn't usually this crowded, but my usual beta testers aren't available right now, so nothing is making it to 1.0, which means nothing is making it to 0.1, so things start to pile up all along the line."

"What happened to your beta testers? They quit?"

"No. They're serving multiple consecutive life sentences for committing war crimes."

"You let war criminals test your stuff?"

"Only one of them was a war criminal beforehand. The rest became war criminals FOR using my stuff. It's their own fault. I put it right in the EULA. The user assumes responsibility for any interstellar treaties that may be violated by the application of the device in a field environment."

"... What the hell sort of person puts a clause like that in a user agreement?"

"A prudent one. I've got pretty much all of my bases covered. You assume responsibility for violations of local, regional, global, intrasystem, interstellar, intergalactic and interdimentional law, civil, religious, or military. I'm also not responsible for loss of life and limb, property damage, domestic disputes, engineered biological human dieback, nuclear fallout, violations of causality, cascading sub-quantum misalignment, hastening of cosmic heat death, rampant AI, accelerated climate change, geomagnetic reversal, vacuum metastability events, total existence failure, gray goo scenario, red goo scenario – that's a nasty one – tectonic inversion..."

"Okay, I get it. Um... before we get started, what's that smell?"

"What smell?" he asked, sniffing for a moment before nodding, "Oh, right. The Funk."

"Yeah, what's causing that?"

Karter looked at him blankly. "I just said. The Funk."

He turned and raised his voice into a piercing falsetto.

"So-o-o-lb-y-y!"

Almost instantly there came a tapping sound from around the corner of the hallway. Something emerged a moment later. At first, Lex thought it was a smallish, black and white dog. As it came closer, it became clear that if it was a dog, it wasn't any breed he'd ever seen before. The creature was entirely black and white, with a wide bushy tail nearly as large as the rest of its body. It had a very fox-like head, though a bit large and in strictly black and white rather than the traditional black white and red. Its eyes were a bit too large, as well, and silvery tan in color. Twin white lines ran down its back and along its tail to a white tip. It tapped its way excitedly along the hallway toward them, pointed ears perked and twisted forward with interest. Whatever the creature was, it was almost maddeningly cute. It looked more like the latest in a line of stuffed animals that his niece would beg for until they completely covered her bed.

When it got close, Karter crouched down with his hand on his knee, babbling to it in baby talk. It pranced around him, a look of wide-eyed, open-mouthed glee on its face. After collecting a few scratches and pats from Karter, the energetic little thing turned its attention to Lex, who took a cautious step back. It sniffed and scurried around him for a few laps, slightly oversized paws constantly in motion. Finally it sprang from the floor to the young freelancer's shoulder in a single, deceivingly effortless leap.

"Gah, oh jeez, get it off!" Lex blurted in one of the less manly reactions of his life.

It continued to investigate his head, as well as make it exceptionally clear that it was indeed the epicenter of the potent aroma that filled the hall, until Karter stepped over to Lex. The critter moved to the freshly offered shoulder, then draped itself like a feathered boa across his neck, fluffy tail hanging down over the missing arm and head alert and inquisitive on the other side. It sat there with a comfort and casualness that illustrated beyond a shadow of a doubt that this was its preferred location.

"What is that thing?" Lex asked.

"It is a Fox\Skunk cross. A Funk. This little guy is technically out of beta, but I'm not planning on taking it to market. I kind of like having the only one."

"So you do gene splicing?"

"Pff. No. Gene splicing is clumsy and stupid. If you do anything beyond swapping out one chemical for another it gets ridiculously hard to produce a viable creature. No, I back-tracked foxes and skunks to their common ancestor, sequenced the DNA, then developed an environmental/genetic simulator program and ran it through a few million years of evolution a couple of hundred times, tweaking the environment until I got a smooth union of the two. Then I ran a few hundred thousand iterations of selective breeding to up the intelligence and add a few other traits I was looking for, exported the resulting DNA, synthesized a sperm and egg, fertilized, incubated, and presto! Solby."

Lex blinked a few times. “Why a fox and a skunk?”

“Enormous pun potential,” he explained, fishing the burrito out of his pocket and holding it up for the creature to munch on.

“You created an entirely new species because it would lead to good jokes.”

“No. I did it because it would lead to bad jokes. For instance, Solby is short for Soul Brother. Get it?”

“No.”

“… Uncultured swine,” Karter said bitterly, “You go look up the greatest composer of the last four hundred years and then we’ll talk. Horrific musical ignorance aside, though, take a look around and see if anything looks interesting to you.”

“Look, I really don’t want-”

“I’ll fix your ship.”

“… Really?”

“Sure, the salvage bots are carting back what’s left of it now. You do enough work for me, I’ll get your ship up and running. You do more, I’ll do more.”

It was a tempting offer. Lex wasn’t usually a sentimental guy, but he’d put a lot of time into that ship. It had gotten him through a few rough spots, and he owed a fair amount of his good reputation to the performance he’d squeezed out of it. The thought of getting it back was tempting. The thought of it not costing him an arm and a leg was even better. He glanced at his host and instantly wished he’d selected a different metaphor. The lunatic was staring off into space, eyes darting back and forth as he fiddled with some machinery half a building away.

Still, if he was careful, this could be well worth it. He looked over the contents of the hall, pacing along. There was a lot to see, and in a staggering variety. They all had one thing in common, though. Each had a handmade quality to it. Enclosures were boxy and screwed together. Wires and tubes were exposed. Duct tape made an appearance in virtually all of them, often to the point that nothing else was visible. Some things were fairly obvious. Weapons, hand tools, appliances, and other things of that nature. Others were completely unidentifiable or so innocuous it was difficult to determine what could possibly be worth testing. One such device looked to be little more than a set of thick, bright blue work gloves with a lumpy bundle attached to the wrists.

“What are these?” Lex asked.

“Just a second. Finishing up... Okay, Ma, put the power module through the paces and let me know the test results when they’re done. Also, fab up a fresh arm to replace the one I blew up.”

“The arm is already replaced. Testing on the module will begin shortly,” the computer replied.

“Good,” Karter said, turning to Lex, “Now what were jabbering about?”

“Um... Before we go into that... what’s the deal with, uh... ‘Ma?’” he asked, adding finger quotes to the name.

“Oh, Ma has been out of beta for years. No more testing needed.”

“Yeah, but what’s her story?”

“Oh, she was my attempt at Altruistic AI,” he said with a shrug, “See, I’d tried the whole ‘Three Rules of Robotics’ method, but it was problematic. Full of loopholes and logical pitfalls. The alternative is Altruistic AI. You teach a computer to be generally friendly, generous, helpful, stuff like that. That way, when faced with an issue that doesn’t fall neatly into black and white territory, it will be able to discern the lighter shade of gray. The goal with Ma was to produce an AI control system that was nurturing. It didn’t turn out exactly how I wanted, though. She can be kind of petty.”

“It is not petty to expect appropriate treatment,” the voice stated flatly.

“So... she has feelings?”

“Ish,” he said with a waggle of his hand, “Algorithmic approximations thereof.”

“Oh... Why did you name her Ma? I guess because of that nurturing thing?”

“She’s an enormous nag, and she does all of the housework. What would YOU call her?”

Lex stared at him blankly. “... Wow. That’s... That’s a very antiquated view of women.”

“It doesn’t count as sexist if it’s against a computer.”

An automated device, similar to the one that had performed surgery on Lex, emerged from a nearby access panel. This one was little more than a mechanized gripper, and it was currently holding another prosthetic arm.

“Here is your arm, Mr. Dee,” the voice said, dropping the arm on the floor as he reached for it.

Karter leaned down and fetched it without comment, the creature on his shoulders flicking its tail out of the way to allow him to click it back into place.

“Right, so, you were asking about the glove,” he said, “Kinetic capacitor demo unit. Modern inertial inhibitors cancel out inertia, but I figure that’s wasteful, so I tried to see if I could absorb it and store it for later. I didn’t quite achieve it, but I got close.”

The inventor slipped a glove onto his false hand and paced into the room behind the shelf, where a number of pressure gauges and gym-style punching bags were set up.

“See, when active, these suckers soak up kinetic energy,” he explained, tapping the bundle at the base of the glove, and slowly heaving it in a circle, like a cartoon character winding up for a punch. It looked like it was taking all of the strength he could muster to do so, “Soaking up kinetic energy makes them very hard to move, but that tapers off as they fill up.”

Steadily the circling arm moved a bit faster until it seemed unaffected.

“Once it is full, you pull back, clench the fist to prime the discharge, then put a little momentum behind it, relative to your starting velocity. Relative was the hard part. I have to filter out most, but not all, motion. Otherwise activating this thing on a moving train, or a rotating planet for that matter, would have serious consequences.”

He began a punching motion. At first it was normal, but after a few inches it seemed to accelerate, and when he struck the padded pressure gauge panel, the whole refrigerator-sized contraption rolled backward. When he tried to withdraw his hand, he had to tug with all of his might, and even still it just crept through the air.

“And therein lies the problem. I can sort of manipulate the charge speed, but the discharge is always all at once. Not terribly useful. And it might screw your arm up pretty bad if you were to throw a punch without something to hit within arm’s length. Wanna give it a try?”

“No, that’s okay. I don’t have a metal hand. Punching with that kind of force would turn my fist into gravel.”

“Yeah, it would. Which is why I created this nano-lattice cloth. Pump some juice into it and it goes rigid. Structural strength falls somewhere in the high gauge stainless steel range.”

“Nice. I guess you probably made a killing with that stuff already.”

“What, the cloth? The cloth is a side product. Why would anyone want that?”

“Well, if I’d had a flight suit made of that, you wouldn’t have had to fix that hole in my leg.”

Karter looked at Lex flatly for a moment, then glanced off thoughtfully, and finally shrugged, grabbing a nearby pad and scribbling ‘Nano-lattice flight suits.’

“Right. Next.”

The pair wandered out into the hall again. After looking over the offerings some more, he lingered upon an odd bundle of wires and antennae, all wrapped in a layer of duct tape and sporting a set of shoulder straps.

“What is this, some kind of jet pack?”

“No, no. Here, watch,” he said, scooping up Solby and depositing him on Lex’s shoulder.

“No, come on! This thing reeks!” Lex complained as the creature cuddled around his neck and licked his ear.

Karter strapped on the device and twisted a knob on the side a few degrees. Nothing happened. Lex stared at him for a few seconds, then glanced around, starting to feel foolish. Steadily, he began to wonder what he’d been doing alone in the room to begin with. Hadn’t there been someone in here a minute ago? The pilot paced around the room, leaning out the door, absentmindedly scratching the fuzzy little creature on his shoulder, and generally trying to figure out what he was supposed to be doing. An instant later, Karter twisted the knob again and Lex suddenly noticed he had been

standing there the whole time. Evidently Solby noticed as well, as he was eager to leap back to his master's shoulder as soon as the device was removed.

"What... what just happened? Were you here? Wait... You WERE here," Lex said, confused, "What did you do?"

"I call it the mental cloak. This device broadcasts a pair of psionic frequencies that stimulate the recognition center of the brain. It makes any sufficiently developed mind dismiss the person wearing it as though they were supposed to be there. You know that they are there, but it doesn't warrant your attention. Sort of the same way as you can always see your nose, but your brain just tunes it out."

"You can't always see your... oh, wow."

"Uh huh. At full power it works on everyone in a twenty-five kilometer radius. Metal and other infrastructure severely decreases the range, but... you're still hung up on the nose thing, aren't you?"

"It's mind blowing," Lex said, darting his eyes back and forth, "But anyway, your thing is amazing! What's wrong with it as it is, that it needs more testing? It worked perfectly. And it would do it to everyone in a twenty-five kilometer radius?"

"Yes, but there are tons of flaws. It only really works to camouflage humanoids. You could strap it to a tank, but the effect is much weaker. Don't know why. Probably psychological. Also, it doesn't work on electronics, so security cams and such still see you, and people looking at you remotely still see you as long as they are outside of the range. The damn thing weighs forty kilos, so it isn't really what you'd call portable. Oh, and at full power, it causes seizures."

"Causes seizures? In who!?"

"Everyone in a twenty-five kilometer radius," he repeated.

"… You... didn't turn it up to full just now, did you?"

"No."

"Good. Okay. Seizures. Yeah, I can see how a device that might accidentally give seizures to an entire city would be a tough sell. I guess you could always just sell it as a weapon of mass destruction," Lex offered with a nervous chuckle.

"Meh," he said with a shrug, "There are easier ways to cause mass brain trauma. But then, I guess you can never have too many ways to skin a cat."

He scratched down 'Seizure Bomb' on his pad and moved on. Lex made a mental note to choose his words wisely. The pair worked their way through a series of inventions with defects ranging from low battery life to massive radiological risk. Karter must have been unbelievably single-minded in their creation, because even the most harmless observations seemed to inspire him. Granted, the inspirations tended heavily toward the destructive, such as the prototype humidifier that was now well on its way to being an 'oxidation accelerator,' which evidently had something to do with causing rust. After an

hour or two, the tour of the Hall of Rejects was nearly complete.

"Well, it just goes to show you," the inventor said as he flipped through the pages of notes and ideas, "It is easy to think outside the box when you aren't smart enough to know where the box is."

"Uh huh, you're welcome," Lex said, "What's that?"

At the end of the hallway was a massively reinforced section of wall. It had the sort of door you would expect on a nuclear reactor, and some sort of hazardous materials suit hung conspicuously outside.

"Oh, come on, check it out!" he said, almost excitedly.

"No thanks. As a rule, I stay away from rooms that require an outfit like that."

"The suit's a leftover from when I ran this thing off of an isolated power supply. We're hooked into the mains now. No more danger. At least, not the kind that suit would help with."

"See, that doesn't fill me with confidence."

"Relax! I want to show you this. It is one of my favorite dead ends. Let me give you one little demo and you are good for a complete rebuild on that ship, plus upgrades. Okay? Either that or I'll kill you if you don't. Whatever you find more motivating."

"… Upgrades, you say?"

"Or death."

"… Fine."

"Excellent. Ma! Open the door to the magic mirror and start the power up sequence!"

"Yes sir," the voice replied.

Bolts the size of Lex's thigh began to steadily unscrew themselves on the door. Behind it, an ominous hum began to throb with an increasing ferocity like the beginning of every techno song ever made. Eventually the restraints finished retracting and the ponderous door swung open like that of a bank vault. Instantly the sound of the pounding hum became ten times louder and was joined by the whine of cooling fans and the random click of large electrical relays.

"You should inform your guest of the safety precautions," the computer's voice sounded over the din.

"You do it," Karter barked as he jogged into the room.

The chamber was tiny in comparison to the others. Its walls were covered with cabling, control panels, and gauges. Most of the floor space was dominated by a machine about the size of a large car. The bottom third of it was a metallic brick. The sides of it were mostly featureless besides a gratuitous amount of bolts and welds. The top was bristling with a nail bed of what appeared to be black spikes, each studded with glowing lights. The front had a ring, nearly as tall as Lex, bolted securely into it, with nodes at regular intervals that crackled with power. Behind the ring were four missile-like cylinders, two stacks of two, that ran the length of the apparatus and pointed

gaping open ends at the ring.

"Please observe caution in the vicinity of the magic mirror," the computer began, "It is a dangerous tool. Do not stand directly in front of the magic mirror. A red line is painted on the floor below you. This is the minimum safe distance line. Do not cross it. Please secure any loose clothing. Any clothing or jewelry passing the minimum safe distance line is a serious hazard. For maximum safety, please secure yourself to-"

"That's plenty," Karter said from behind the machine.

He was busy plugging in cables roughly the size of fire hoses, and with similar connectors. There were five of them. Each time he clicked another into place, lights on the device flared and the lights of the rest of the building dimmed. Finally he sidled past the machine, grabbed a rung on one side of the door, and smiled.

"Are you sure about-" Lex began.

"Let 'er rip, Ma!"

There was the echoing, mechanical clunk of a huge relay actuating. The lights dimmed, the throbbing power sound faded, and the fans slowed. For a few seconds, there was only comparative silence and the dim glow of the various indicator LEDs. A moment later the lights and fans were restored and the various noises returned to full volume, now joined by a crackle of power and an odd, hard to place hiss. In the center of the ring, which was now wreathed in pale blue light, there was a tiny black dot. Strangely, the view of the machine through the ring seemed closer, like the ring was a magnifying glass. Around the machine, the cables on the walls all seemed to pull slightly toward the center of the ring, and the whole of the facility seemed to tilt toward it. Lex leaned back and held a little tighter to the door's rung.

"Ta-da!" he said.

"I don't get it. You created the least efficient magnifying glass in the universe?"

"Ma! Show us an external view!"

The view thorough the ring began to shift. It was pulling back, like a camera on a dolly, until it swept past them and continued down the hall. Lex turned to see what was viewing them, but there was nothing there. He looked back to the "mirror" to see the view retreating further down the hallway. When it reached the wall it continued, flickering to blackness when the viewpoint passed into solid metal and stone. Then it moved off to the outside.

"Uh..."

"This sucker, in its current state, can give me a view of anything within roughly 0.05 astronomical units. I can even dial it a few days into the past or future. Give us a demo, Ma."

The view swiveled toward the sky, and abruptly seemed to show a time lapse. Thin, wispy clouds rocketed across the sky, the fuzzy white disk of the sun flowed from horizon to horizon. As it did, the view became far less focused and the whir of fans increased. He watched his ship crashing in

reverse in the distance, then blinked as the sun began to whip in the other direction, ticking forward in time to replay the crash and continue onward. The once clear image became an unrecognizable blur with a vast blotch of darkness high in the sky, then collapsed into the black dot in the center. Whatever that dot was, it was larger now, having grown from a pinpoint to a small, featureless black marble.

"That's... that's remarkable. How does it work?"

"Using a proprietary blend of high velocity particles and gravitational interaction. In theory, if I dialed up the power and tuned the filtering algorithms enough, I could show any location in the universe at any point in time."

"How the hell is this still considered a reject?!"

"It is taking about 97% of the planetary power output to pull off this stunt. Seeing even to the next star system would take us into supernova levels of energy. That and the fact that those cylinders there are high intensity particle beam cannons, and the dot is an artificially stabilized miniature black hole that grows exponentially during operation. Basically this is four siege weapons firing at a weapon of mass destruction. Not very marketable."

"Approaching critical levels," the computer warned.

"Yeah, shut 'er down."

"Please evacuate the area, and prepare for hawking radiation discharge," Ma warned.

The pair of men hustled out of the room. Lex watched as the door started to close.

"Okay so you owe me a fully rebuilt ship and..." Lex began, slowly realizing that Karter was still running at a fairly brisk pace down the hall.

He stopped talking and started running. It is a lesson you learn pretty quickly when you spend time around a race track: If someone is running, follow first, then ask questions. It had saved him from being pancaked by rogue hoversleds on more than one occasion, and it turned out it was a pretty good policy for life in general. After closing the gap between them, Lex and Karter turned a corner in the hallway, where the older man caught his breath. A moment later, there was a soft clap and a wave of heat wafted down the hall.

"Why'd you run?" Karter asked.

"Why didn't you TELL me to run?"

"Because that wouldn't have killed you. It just would have singed you a little. You big baby."

"Well then why did YOU run?"

"I didn't want to get singed."

"Attention. The salvage vehicles have returned with the remains of Mr. Alexander's ship," Ma alerted.

"Great! Let's go check it out!" Karter said, rubbing his hands together.

Chapter 10

The inventor and the pilot stood in the hangar. It wasn't one of the cavernous aircraft storage facilities people tend to envision when you use the word hangar. At least, not currently. It had a massive, towering roof that lead all the way from the subbasement to the ground level where the bay doors were, but thin, temporary walls were dividing the full hangar up into a few dozen spaces just large enough to house a single ship and various pieces of repair and diagnostic equipment. It gave the place the overall atmosphere of the intensive care unit at a hospital, each bed separated off with curtains. In a way that's what it was. Right now the patient was a mangled pile that the automated rovers had hauled in. It took a trained eye to even recognize it as a ship, let alone the one Lex had been piloting. Karter let out a low whistle.

"That's a CA double I revision... 34D, right?" he asked.

"Uh... yeah, actually."

"Ni-i-i-ice. They don't make them like this anymore. Well, they NEVER made them like this. Too many engine mounts. You got the schematics?"

"No, there aren't any. I sort of just grafted stuff on, you know?"

"Free form. Nice. But a bitch to repair. I'll just pull up the schematics on file, then. Ma! Get the diagnostic cart out here and draw up the schematics."

"I don't know how useful the official schematics are going to-"

"I'm not putting it back together the way you had it. Obviously the way you had it sucked. It needed fixing before it even crashed."

"Look, it might not have been top of the line, but it did what I needed it to do."

A small, motorized cart appeared from an access tunnel on the far side of the hanger. It was heavily hung with tools, both from its sides and from a gantry that was supported over its work surface. As it puttered along the floor, a roll of paper that jutted from one edge dispensed a sheet, which was clamped down and cut to length. A pen plotter descended from the gantry and danced quickly across the poster-sized sheet, so that by the time the cart jerked to a halt in front of Karter, a full structural schematic was completed. He pulled it free, grabbed a pen from the rack on the cart, and started awkwardly folding and notating the plans.

"Paper? Seriously?" Lex asked doubtfully.

"The problem with engineers today is that they don't think on paper. So you had, what, four engines?"

"Six. Double the usual complement of Cantrell engines, plus-"

"Yeah, I see. Two of those little ones. Any steering considerations?"

For a few minutes, the pair worked through the various changes Lex had made. When they were through, Karter scribbled down some calculations.

"Those specs look about right?" he asked.

Lex looked over the numbers.

"Well, it's been a while since I benchmarked it, but yeah, that's close."

“Okay, meet or beat,” he said, “What sort of direction were you thinking for upgrades?”

“Speed. I need this thing fast. And a little more maneuverability would help.”

“Weapons?”

“Absolutely not. If I get caught, the last thing I need is them being able to claim I opened fire on them.”

“Nothing obvious, then. Plausible deniability and all that. Defenses?”

Lex glanced at the twisted metal that had been the cockpit.

“A shield upgrade seems appropriate, I guess. Other than that, I usually depend on not being seen.”

“Stealth, right. Countermeasures?”

“Nothing fancy.”

“Okay,” he said, finishing off his notes, pulling up a chair, and staring to sketch out plans.

After a few seconds of standing quietly, the pilot cleared his throat.

“Are you still here?” Karter asked without looking.

“Yeah. What do you want me to do?”

“Don’t care. Busy.”

“So I should just-”

“DON’T CARE, BUSY!” he said, standing up and ushering Lex away, “If you need anything, ask Ma.”

With that he slammed the rickety door to the temporary room, leaving Lex outside. The pilot stood still for a moment, not sure what to do. There were a few things he needed, one rather urgently, but judging from the general attitude the computer had shown, he wasn’t eager to speak up. As if detecting his reluctance, the system spoke up.

“Do you require anything, Mr. Alexander?” it asked, with the mechanical politeness that was the hallmark of voice recognition systems.

“… Bathroom,” he said, sheepishly.

“Of course. Please follow the blue line.”

A line in the floor, what Lex initially thought was simply the gap between two rows of tiles, began to pulse blue. The lights streaked steadily forward. There was a fifty-fifty chance that these lights were going to lead him somewhere unpleasant. Considering the sort of stuff he was likely to encounter if he were to wander blindly around, though, what she had in mind couldn’t possibly be worse. With a shrug, he followed the lights.

Five minutes later, he was still following them. He had taken four elevators, six flights of stairs, and was fairly certain his bladder was about to explode.

“Okay, stop. Message received,” Lex said, fidgeting.

“I do not know what you mean.”

“There is no way we haven’t passed at least ONE bathroom. You are screwing with me.”

"Mr. Alexander. That would be petty."

Lex sighed and tried to stand still for a moment.

"Ma. When I first spoke with you, I was not aware of the depth of your intelligence and the complexity of your role. As such, I did not treat you with the courtesy and respect that you deserve. For that, I apologize," he said, steadily, "And I'm sorry if my sentiment seems rushed or insincere, but I'm now crossing over a whole new threshold of urgency, so if I don't get to a bathroom soon, there is going to be a mess."

There was a handful of short bursts of sound, as though the first few milliseconds of a reply had been played and cut off a few times. Finally, the blue lights running down the hall abruptly shifted their path, leading down a hallway to the right, and up to the top of a clearly marked bathroom door.

"Thank you," Lex said gratefully, rushing inside and beginning the complicated process of opening enough of his flight suit to make use of standard bathroom facilities.

"Karter estimates time to repair is seventy-two hours," the voice said at the precise moment he was about to begin.

Once he recovered from his body's stinging reprisal for interrupting a necessary function, Lex replied.

"Yeah, uh, that's great... Are you watching me right now?"

"My local sensors are active."

"I can't pee while you're watching me."

"Interesting. Karter is not similarly afflicted."

"Could you, I don't know, turn around or something?"

"I can deactivate the visual sensors. It would be a strictly symbolic gesture. I am still aware of what you are doing and where you are doing it."

"It is a psychological thing."

A moment later there was a faint beep, "Deactivated." The voice came from the hall outside the door.

The pilot finally took care of some very pressing business. He heard the cameras blip back on while he was washing his hands.

"Ma?"

"Yes?" replied the voice, now clearly from the nearest speaker again.

"Well, first off, should I be calling you Ma? It seems kind of personal."

"That is my designation."

"Okay then. Would you please show me the way back to my stuff? And maybe lead me someplace where I can catch a few hours of sleep."

"Follow the red lights upon leaving the bathroom."

A refreshingly short walk and an elevator ride later, Lex found himself on a floor that looked like just about any army barracks he'd ever seen. It was broken up into a handful of long rooms, each lined with a row of double bunks along each wall. On the opposite side of the room was a bank of lockers and a doorway leading to a white tiled room. Every bed was made and immaculate, and none of them looked as though they had been used recently,

if ever. He opened his mouth to ask where he could find his things, but before he could make a sound, the packages and his helmet were carted in by a pair of the same robot grippers that had delivered Karter's arm.

"Bathroom and shower facilities are at the far end of the room. Jumpsuits are available in the lockers."

"Thanks, Ma."

"Processing... You are welcome, Mr. Alexander."

The lockers were unlocked, and it only took a little bit of digging to find an outfit that was roughly the right size. In his search, Lex also found a towel and some toiletries. He stripped out of his blood soaked and more than a little rank flight suit and cranked up one of the showers. The result wasn't what he was used to. His own apartment had what could charitably be called a shower, but the pressure and temperature made it more seem like the wall was peeing on him. Hygiene on the ship came in the form of a periodic rubdown with glorified moist towelettes. In comparison, the facilities here were like a piping hot pressure washer. The almost scalding water hammering on his muscles released knots that had been there for weeks.

Nearly half an hour under the hot spray finally left Lex feeling halfway human again. Granted, wearing a second-hand jumpsuit commando style wasn't how he'd planned on spending the night, but you win some, you lose some. By rights, he probably should have been trying to find some way to get back to the task of delivering his package, but getting shot down and torn up had done a number on his body. The inevitable crash after all of that adrenaline was making a bed that didn't serve double duty as a pilot's chair sound awfully good.

Within seconds of plopping down on the nearest bed, he was dead to the world. Unfortunately, his nap was hardly a pleasant one. It turns out having your ship blown out of orbit and sent crashing to a barren planet's surface is the sort of thing that sticks with you. He jerked awake at the moment of impact for a third time before he decided a distraction was in order.

Lex wandered over to the spot on the floor near the shower where he'd left the jumbled mess of his flight suit. He'd had his slidepad in his pocket, but hopefully it hadn't been too badly damaged during the fall. The suit wasn't where he left it. Instead, it was neatly laid out on a nearby bed. The blood stains were conspicuously absent, and the slashed leg had only a faint line of fine stitches and sealant to suggest it had ever been damaged at all. The contents of his many pockets were arranged with care beside it, including casino chips in neat piles, a fresh roll of duct tape, and an unopened pack of gum. The helmet was there, the damaged visor replaced and polished. He picked up his slidepad, to find it whole and functional. The battery had even been charged.

"Um... Ma?"

"Yes, Mr. Alexander?"

"Did you do this?"

"Yes, Mr. Alexander."

"Thank you."

"You are very welcome. I thought you'd intended to sleep."

"Can't. Bad dreams."

"I can offer you a sedative if you like. We have a full chemical synthesis facility, and I keep a ready supply of many potent narcotic, anti-psychotic, and analgesic compounds."

"No, thank you," he said, taking careful note of the presence of anti-psychotics on the short list, "Why are you being so nice all of a sudden?"

"Because you apologized, and you thanked me. Neither Karter nor any of his rare guests have ever done that. I appreciate a gentleman."

"Wow. Thanks. That's... kind of a quick turnaround."

"As an artificial intelligence, I am capable of assessing and altering my disposition and the resultant attitudes quite rapidly."

"Like mood swings?"

"That is an adequately similar human emotional phenomenon."

"I will try to stay on your good side, then."

"That is advisable. If you have any more requests, do not hesitate to ask."

Lex poked at his slidepad for a bit. It was more responsive, too. Improvements aside, though, the data connection was down, and it wouldn't come back up.

"Um, actually, before you go-" he said quickly.

"I am everywhere, always. I do not go anywhere," she replied.

"Oh, right. Not to be a pest, but I can't seem to connect to the net."

"I am afraid the debris field makes stable connectivity to the network impossible with small scale devices. Once a week a local cache of data resources that Karter considers relevant is pulled down. The next differential replication is scheduled immediately following the remapping of the field. If you have a request for additional information, I can add it to the data list."

"What sort of stuff do you have on the local cache?"

"Approximately 1% engineering periodicals, 1% general reference material, 1% contact information directories, 2% multimedia entertainment and news feeds, and 95% pornographic materials of the following subcategories-"

"That's fine!" he said quickly, not terribly interested in what sort of tastes Karter might have in that area, "Thanks. I should have figured. I'll just look at what I pulled down before I came through."

He pulled up the saved data and started to chew through it. Most of it was the usual stuff. Cantrell was issuing a new model of pleasure cruiser. Half a dozen messages offering him vast wealth and/or massive genitals in exchange for his bank account info. He was about to shut the slidepad off and try to find something else to do when he saw that there was a news alert saved. He tapped the file and a pert young anchorwoman all the way back on Earth began to work her way through her "solemn" routine.

“Tragedy struck the planet Golana today, as a small commuter shuttle succumbed to pilot error while on a routine trip. The transit hub oversees thousands of passenger and cargo flights per hour, and this is the first such accident in more than five years. Links below lead to the profile pages of the twenty-seven passengers and crew who lost their lives in the event.”

She went on to fill in details that they couldn’t possibly know about the pilot that made him out to be solely responsible for the crash. That was always the way. When in doubt, throw the pilot under the bus. Lex pulled up the list of victims and began to scroll through it. There were over a billion people on his planet, and a few dozen times that used the transport lanes around it every year, so the likelihood of him recognizing a face or name was pretty slim. Regardless, it was a big galaxy, and when something happens as nearby as your home planet, you take a look.

It was for that reason alone that he found himself looking at the face of a woman named Sarah Jones. She was thin, with unremarkable features and mouse-brown hair... And he’d seen her before. She hadn’t said her name, but there was no mistaking it. This was the very woman who had handed him the package. His heart started beating faster as he tapped his way back to the main article and searched the transcript.

“… after investigators were able to contact VectorCorp, owners of the shuttle, for comments regarding the disaster …”

VectorCorp. Granted, it wasn’t a long shot that VectorCorp would have been the owners. They probably owned half of the ships that used those lanes. But in the time he’d been running packages, he’d only had two people even threaten to pull the trigger on him. Now he’d been shot down carrying a package sent by a woman who had been killed in the crash of one of their shuttles just hours before? It COULD be a coincidence... but it could be the package.

He looked to the silver case on the floor beside his bed. Unlike the package Blake had given him, which was somehow mostly intact, the special delivery had taken a hell of a wallop when he slid down the cliff side. One of the locks was a mess of broken metal, and the other was hanging on by the skin of its teeth. It would probably pop open if he looked at it wrong. Taking a peek inside would be easy enough. He walked slowly over to it, leaned down, extended his hand...

“No,” he said, slapping it down and forcing the lid tight.

“Were you addressing me, Mr. Alexander?” asked Ma.

“No. Thank you. Where is Karter?” he asked, starting his fresh roll of tape and wrapping a few layers around the damaged case.

“He has just unleashed a short sequence of profanities in his workshop before ordering me to prepare an array of replacement struts and some burn ointment. I suspect he will be taking a break until fabrication is complete. Did you want me to repair the metal case? I presumed it was one of the packages you were delivering, and thus should not have been touched.”

"Uh, no, no. Can you lead me to Karter, please? I need to talk to him," Lex said, gathering up his things.

"Certainly, follow the red lights."

The pilot managed to catch up to his unusual host as he was headed down the main corridor toward the exit.

"Karter!" he called, hustling after him with arms loaded down, "I need to talk to you!"

"Are you still here?" Karter said as he pulled on a coat and adjusted a fresh bandage on his non-prosthetic wrist.

"Yes I'm still here! That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I need to get the hell off of this planet and get rid of this package."

"It can wait."

With a whistle, Karter summoned his pet and headed for the door.

"No, Karter, it can't. This is my reputation we're talking about. Plus, I'm pretty sure that VectorCorp has a problem with the contents of the package."

"And you want to toss the hot potato before the music stops."

"And collect the rest of my money, if I can."

Karter silently considered for a moment.

"Fine," he said, continuing toward the door, "If it will shut you up and get you out of my face for a few days, I'll toss you a loaner. Solby needs to drop a deuce, so we'll swing by the hangar and see what I'm willing to part with. Ma! Open the front door and pull the bus around."

"Opening. Please remember to prepare yourself for local gravitational intensity, and move swiftly to the bus. Ambient temperature is approaching danger levels," the voice replied.

A sudden change in gravity is a tricky thing to prepare for. Stepping out of the facility and its accompanying artificial gravity felt vaguely like climbing a staircase that has one step fewer than you'd expected. The human brain has been trained to cope with things like a sudden shift to zero g, like stepping off a cliff, or the gradual slide up and down in acceleration that you get in an old fashioned elevator. Moving suddenly from normal gravity to just a bit more than half of that locks the brain into the "Oh my God, the ground is falling out from underneath me!" mindset for a good thirty seconds. Even when you know it is coming, you find yourself taking ridiculous exaggerated steps and trying to get your stomach back down where it belongs. Or at least, that's what happens when you haven't been doing it day in and day out for who knows how long, apparently, because both Karter and his adorable little fur ball made the dismount flawlessly.

Once Lex had gotten a grip on the new physics and recovered from the slap in the face that the sudden cold had given him, he caught up to the others. Karter was crunching across the gravel with his hands in his pockets, head down against a stiff wind and heading toward the school bus. Solby did his business, finishing off the whole process by making a half-hearted effort to kick some dirt over the evidence. He then commenced prancing about, taking

full advantage of the reduced gravity to turn his already prodigious leaps into something just slightly absurd. Once Karter and Lex had climbed into the bus, a quick pat on the leg brought the little creature bounding through the door.

"Ma! Clean up!" Karter called out before he shut the door.

Almost instantly there was a flare of light and the mess left behind vanished in a burst of smoke and flames. Lex leaned against the window just in time to see one of the roof mounted lasers shift back toward the sky

"You vaporize dog doo with lasers?!" Lex scoffed.

"Give a man access to a turd and a laser and there can be but one outcome."

They set off toward the opposite side of the compound at a leisurely pace. Solby took the opportunity to assault Lex, diving onto his lap, flicking its little tongue over his face, and rolling onto its back to beg a belly rub. Lex ruffled its incredibly soft fur and scratched at its neck for a few seconds, to sounds of general delight.

"You know, this thing is pretty neat. Too bad about the smell, or this would be a pretty awesome pet."

"Eh, there's a pill I made that takes away the smell for six months at a time."

"… Then why don't you give it to him?"

"I realized that I don't care. It only really stinks when he sprays, and he almost never does that anymore," he said, adding in baby talk, "Isn't that true, little guy? You're too smart for that, aren't you?"

"How smart IS he?"

"I don't know. There aren't any reliable IQ tests for non-verbal quadrupeds. Very smart, though. By design. Now, if you were to ask me why he's all over YOU right now? No idea. There's been no other people on this rock besides me in years. I'd have figured he'd be territorial and vicious."

Currently it was gnawing gently on Lex's fingers, which seemed to be the extent of its vicious territoriality. Lex was doing his best to resist the almost toxic levels of cuteness when something strange caught his eye. On the back of its neck, between the twin white lines of fur running along its spine, Solby had what looked to be a small glass marble. Periodically it would blink a faint red.

"What is this? Some kind of fancy collar?" he asked.

"We're getting into proprietary information territory again."

"Seriously? You think I'm going to steal your ideas and genetically engineer my own?

"It is called industrial espionage. It used to be a problem for me."

"How'd you take care of it?"

"With extreme prejudice. We're here."

The bus dropped to the ground outside of a building that was for all appearances identical to the lab, except for the label, which was in this case an equally crude rendering of the word Hangar. Solby made his way to Karter's

shoulder, curling his enormous fluffy tail around his master's neck like a scarf. The icy air had a vicious bite to it that didn't seem to phase Karter or his pet in the slightest, but sent Lex sprinting for the doorway, which was opening of its own accord.

"Please brace yourself for artificial gravity," came Ma's voice from the new building.

Granted, this time the warning was not spitefully late, but in his haste to get out of the cold, Lex ended up playing the same trick on himself that the computer had managed last time. He crossed the threshold mid-stride and landed far more quickly and heavily than he'd expected, turning his sprint into a sprawling slide that sent his packages bouncing all over the entryway.

"Dumb ass," Karter muttered as he stepped over Lex and into the building.

Solby hopped down and investigated the fallen guest as he hauled himself to his feet again. Lex gathered his things and ended up with the creature hitching a ride on his own shoulder as he trudged inside.

"Karter, I'm pretty sure you screwed up somewhere along the line while you were making this thing. I don't remember reading anything about skunks or foxes hanging out on people's shoulders," Lex griped.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Maybe your designer creature came out better than mine. How did you deal with the nucleotide sequencing fidelity issue when you were creating yours? Oh, that's right, I'm the only one here playing god. So quit being an armchair engineer. Man I hate people. Lights!"

The inside of the building had been pitch black, save for a small pool of light near the entrance. At his command, the vast, echoing thump of breakers engaging filled the air, and lights flickered on, revealing an interior completely unlike that of the lab. There were no walls, no ceilings, and no real floors. The whole of the place was hollow. Metal grill catwalks spiraled up and down the walls, leading to dozens, if not hundreds, of identical docking bays. Most bore a ship, though the condition ranged from stripped down framework to immaculate showpiece. The docking bays continued several stories up to the roof, at least ten floors downward, and ran half of the length of the building. The other half was filled with a mix of larger docks, benchmarking and testing rigs, massive fabrication machines, and a few launch bays.

Thirty seconds passed before Lex realized that Karter had continued walking. To another man this place might have been a curiosity, or perhaps simply an impressive sight. To him, it was a cathedral. Machines he had lusted over throughout his youth stood proud and pristine in their docks. Glorious triumphs of form and function hung like ornaments along the walls. He felt like an explorer stumbling upon an untouched tomb of a forgotten pharaoh.

"These are all yours?" Lex uttered, his voice hoarse.

"Yep. Restorations on the right, upgraded reproductions on the left.

You'll be taking a reproduction."

"How can you afford all of these..."

"I own the goddamn planet. A couple of ships aren't going to bankrupt me."

"Wait, you OWN the planet?"

"I'm pretty sure I told you that this was my planet," he said with a scowl.

"I thought you meant it like, you know, 'my home town' or 'my country.' You can't actually own a planet!"

"It was a hazardous waste zone. I got it for cheap. Never mind that, though. Ma! Bring down the ships I'm willing to risk on this yahoo."

"I am unfamiliar with that particular classification of ship," the voice replied.

"Fully functional, single seat reproductions of ships still in regular circulation."

"You have sixty-three ships that fit that description, and only twenty-four display bays."

"Put them up on the console," Karter said, gesturing toward the large touch panel beside the entrance.

Lex turned to see a grid of ship makes and models appear on the screen. Evidently, Ma had a generous definition of "regular circulation." There were ships ranging from bottom of the line econo-boxes to limited edition concept ships. The idea of any single facility having access to all of them, let alone any single man, was mind boggling. One by one, he tapped the check boxes next to the ships he most wanted to see.

"These specs are wrong. The Shetti 8080 never came near that kind of power output. All of them are kind of high," Lex said as he browsed.

"Upgraded. Modern guts. You done?"

Lex quickly finished picking his two dozen favorites. As soon as he'd chosen the last, there was a distant whine of mechanical arms and conveyor belts. One by one, gleaming and spotless replicas of the ships he'd selected were plucked from their docks and deposited in the display bays that ran along either side of the central catwalk in front of them. He practically ran down the narrow metal walkway, eyes wide and mouth watering.

"The NVS MacDonald! This was my first ship! The Demeter 83i, I set the track record on Meedle Speed Loop in one of these. That's the Cantrell body I built Betsy on. This Mobius Armistice was-"

"I don't need a life story. Pick one."

Lex jogged along the line until he stopped at a sleek, distinctive ship. In a way, it looked the way Betsy would have if she'd been designed by scientists and engineers instead of necessity and availability. A classy, smooth fuselage, aerodynamic even though it didn't need to be, with lines that flowed like silk into a bank of purpose-built engines. More powerful than it needed to be, more streamlined than it needed to be, and bristling with weapon mounts. It was a DAR.

"The prick who shot me down was piloting one of these. It'll be nice to see what he was working with."

"You have selected the Delta Astro-Recon, Type D," Ma proclaimed.

Automated lifts returned the other ships to their slots.

"Alright, Ma. Where do we stand with the debris remapping?" Karter asked.

"Approximately thirty-one hours remaining."

"No, no, no. I can't wait that long," Lex said, "The sooner I get rid of this package, the better."

"Relax. Ma, remind me, what are we remapping toward?"

"In order to maintain our status as a licensed salvage and recycling facility, we are required to comply with the Intersystem Transport Accord's Guidelines for Navigable Debris Fields. Under current accord regulations, we must identify voids in the debris that are a minimum measurement of the ship's maximum dimension plus five hundred percent and a minimum duration of fifteen seconds. Those are the outside requirements for autopilot navigation."

"Are you kidding me? I could fly this building through a hole that big," Lex snapped.

"Yeah, he could," nodded Karter.

The pilot eyed his host suspiciously.

"Why do you believe me?"

"Because the flight computer of your ship was partially intact. I pulled the telemetry from the last few minutes of your flight. It was good stuff. Savant stuff. I think we can assume you'll make it through a hole that an autopilot couldn't. Ma! Make that 15% instead of 500%, and minimum duration of, say, 300 milliseconds."

"That's more like it," Lex said with a grin.

"Exit windows fitting those specifications can, at this point in the processing of the data, be reliably identified to occur approximately once every seventeen minutes," she said.

"Great. Ma, grant pilot privileges and show him the door," Karter said. He then turned and headed back toward the entrance, snagging Solby as he went. "When I'm done with your ship I'll let you know. Bring that thing back in one piece or I'm charging you."

"Wait! If I'm going to be using this, I'll need a way to turn the transponder off!"

"It doesn't have a transponder. Just grab one from the bucket," he said, gesturing vaguely at a crate by the door as he left.

Upon inspection, the crate was filled with dozens of metal cylinders. Each was about the size of a flashlight and had a serial number and vehicle name written on the side in permanent marker. He picked one up and twisted the base of it. A brilliant red light began to blink on one side. Lex grinned, rummaging through the crate and making some choice selections. It wasn't

the same thing as having a handy programmable transponder like Betsy had, but a pile of manual ones would allow for some interesting options. After a quick change into his freshly repaired flight suit, Lex started loading his things into the cockpit. When he started to climb inside, Ma addressed him.

"You have been given level 1 access to this vehicle. The next exit window will be at the coordinates displayed on your flight computer. I will plot a visual trajectory."

Finally, Lex plopped down to the control seat and strapped in. It just wasn't fair. Even the seat in this thing was better. He worked his way through the start up procedure, activating engines, running diagnostics, checking life support and communications. When the engines were purring and the systems were go, he eased it up out of its bay and toward the retracting hangar doors ahead.

"You handle the ship well," Ma spoke over the com system.

"What can I say, Ma? There's just about one thing in the whole universe I'm actually good at. This is it," he said, beginning to run through his own personal start up procedure.

First he ran the ship through a series of turns, backing the inertial dampener down a notch or two each time until the acceleration felt just right. Then he reached back and popped open the access panel, letting the whine and buzz of the hydraulics and electronics fill the cockpit. He guided the ship over a long, empty expanse of rocky ground and pushed engines a bit. The sounds of the ship took on a new rhythm, like the heartbeat of a runner getting into a groove. He breathed deep, smelling the wires and lubricants as they started to warm up. He closed his eyes and let his senses take it all in. It was a symphony, a banquet. Too many pilots flew with their eyes. He wanted to feel it, hear it, smell it. Try as he might, he couldn't find a way to taste it. That's what the gum was for. He opened the fresh pack of gum and popped a stick into his mouth, the final sense engaged.

"The window is ahead. I have prepared a timer. It has been a pleasure hosting you, Mr. Alexander. I look forward to your return."

"Good meeting you, Ma. Don't let Karter get to you. You want anything while I'm out?"

"If I think of anything, I'll let you know. Window opening now."

With a careful nudge of throttle, Lex brought the DAR into the debris field. It wasn't the simplest exit he'd ever made from a planet. The path that Ma traced out for him was incredibly precise, but her calculations had been sound. Not once did a single fragment of debris larger than a speck of dust brush against his ship. It was disorienting having clusters of metal whisking by in his peripheral vision, and crisscrossing ahead and behind, yet not once being rocked by a collision. In no time at all he was into clear space. Now all he had to do was get rid of the case before anything else could happen.

Chapter 11

The DAR, or at least whatever Karter had made it into, was quite a vessel. In terms of raw speed, it was a hair faster than Betsy. In terms of maneuverability and creature comforts, the DAR left Betsy in the dust. Lex had always considered a heated leather massage seat to be a ridiculous waste of money. His lower back was now urging him to reconsider. It was just as well, because the time lost on the trash heap, coupled with the renewed sense of urgency to be rid of the package, meant that there wouldn't be many more stops. The spicy sawdust bars that were supposed to be keeping him alive right now had mercifully been destroyed in his crash, so he stopped to dump some chips on a replacement. The best value this time came in the form of tubes of protein/vitamin fortified peanut butter. He wisely picked up more than the usual complement of water, as well. Once he was stocked up, he began a series of marathon sprints that would have made a legitimate courier go on strike. It was mind-numbing, exhausting, and left him looking and smelling like a vagrant, but in just under the six day deadline, he was watching his destination pull into view.

Tessera V was, in some ways, a lot like Golana. It was a major transit and shipping hub. Unlike Golana, it was also much, much more. The average climate was famously gorgeous. So much so that most corporations kept a campus there for employee retreats. There were also no less than three highly prestigious colleges. Perhaps the most famous and respected opera house for half a galaxy made its home there. Famous beaches, iconic national parks, and all manner of vacation destinations dotted the landscape. In short, it was a center of commerce, culture, and tourism. And since that sort of place attracts an awful lot of the criminal element, there was a considerable legal presence as well.

It was that last part that he needed to deal with at the moment. The sheer amount of traffic in and out of the average planet meant that a fair amount of ships were allowed to slip through without notice. Such was not the case at Tessera V. The entry process involved the exchange of codes, verification of credentials, and if they didn't like what they heard, a thorough ship search. Figuring out how to get through the arrival processing at planets like this was one of the hardest parts of being a freelancer, and techniques that worked were guarded jealously. Lex had come up with a procedure that usually worked, but he hated to do it. It was one of the more overtly illegal parts of his job, and if he were to get caught it would cost him a fortune in fines. However, since there wasn't much a choice at the moment, he would have to give it a shot. He dug out the DAR transponder and fired it up, then hailed the arrivals center.

"Tessera V, northern hemisphere arrivals, please transmit landing auth code," the voice of a young woman said with all of the enthusiasm she could be expected to muster for a phrase she'd had to say several hundred times that

day.

"I've got an equipment malfunction. Request vocal code submission," Lex said.

"Yes, sir," she replied, murder in her tone, "Please provide the final sixty-four digit code following the-"

"Um, you want to try that again?" he warned.

"Please provide the sixty-four digit-"

"One more time, please. How many digits?"

"Six. Four."

"What, may I ask, happened to the other four hundred and forty-eight digits you were supposed to be asking for?"

"… Oh no..."

"It looks like I'm going to need you to provide your employee number," Lex said with a heavy sigh.

"Goddamn it," she fumed.

The full landing authorization code was a five hundred and twelve digit hexadecimal monster, a mess of letters and numbers that took forever to read out correctly. Worse, once it was read, it was to be read back for confirmation. Absolutely everyone who worked the arrivals desk for more than a few days figured out that all but the last sixty-four digits were identical for every ship in a given day, so they only asked for the unique portion. It was a simple, obvious time saving measure, and without doing it, the queue of people awaiting permission to land would quickly get hours long if even a single person requested to enter their code manually. Like most simple, obvious time saving measures, though, it was utterly against protocol, and thus the only person who would actually object to the short version would be an auditor.

"Hey, listen, this is no picnic for me, either," he said, "Loads of paperwork."

"You guys are flying DARs now? I thought surprise audits were always on cargo vessels."

"It wouldn't be a surprise if we did what you expected. What's the time?"

"Twenty-two fifty-three, galactic, seventeen twenty-eight global."

"That late? … Look, I've got seven minutes to get my reports turned in, and that's pretty much not going to happen if I have to write you up, so let's just say this never happened, okay?"

"Ohthankgod," she said in relieved burst, "So, uh, you wanna give me your auth code?"

"I could, but it would be invalid. That's how these things go, remember. Then they'd have to pull the log of the call, and we'd both get in trouble."

"Oh, yeah. That's right. I'll do a whisper pass, then?"

Since no system designer can possibly anticipate every eventuality, there is always a way to just force a ship through without authorization or logging. Generally it was intended for diplomatic or military vessels, but it was available at the behest of the operator to correct problems that don't present a

security threat.

"That'll do."

"Roger. Clearance applied to your transponder code for twenty-four hours. Thanks for being cool about this."

"Don't worry about it. Just don't get used to it. They pay us to NOT be cool."

Once the com clicked off and the landing light went green, Lex fairly collapsed back into his chair. He was not a conman, and pulling a stunt like that was well outside his comfort zone. Sure, he had nerves of steel when it came to coaxing insane maneuvers out of vehicles of every description, but when it came to this sort of thing he could practically FEEL the ulcer forming. One of these days he was going to have to just try to outrun the patrols like they used to in the old days.

After dropping down into the high atmosphere, he scooted his ship to the appropriate continent, as specified by the delivery instructions. It was a long, narrow strip of land off the coast of the main continent, running from the polar region to a bit past the equator. The whole island was almost perfectly straight, and currently was experiencing night. From high in the atmosphere it looked like a dotted line of glowing clusters, several hundred cities lined up one after the other along a high speed railway that ran the length of the island. The sliver of a continent was called Makou and if it was a distasteful necessity, it was done there. Waste processing, prisons, power generation, industry, and anything else that looked bad or smelled bad got relegated to Makou, which seemed to exist specifically so that the rest of the planet could be beautiful. Lon Djinn was a region of cities along the northern third of Makou that was composed almost entirely of administrative offices and warehouses. The package was to be delivered to, and thus the other half of his payment was to be collected from, a locker in a transit hub at the very center of Lon Djinn. Lex managed to find a shipyard that would accept chips as payment for docking his ship and tried to figure out where he was headed.

As the names would suggest, there was a fairly strong Asian influence to the area - though he'd been told that most of the names had been selected because they sounded Asian, rather than actually being of Asian origin. Tessera V started off many years ago as a US/Chinese joint colony, and even though it had since become home to every race and creed, the nature of society meant that neighborhoods tended to take on a certain flavor over time. In this case, almost all of the signage was in Mandarin (or Cantonese, he never could tell the difference), and the cuisine tended to come with optional chopsticks. After subsisting on food from a tube for the last few days, Lex took a moment to pick something at random off of a menu he didn't understand. A few minutes later he was rewarded with some sort of spicy noodles and dumplings stuffed with meat that was as delicious as it was unidentifiable. A trip to a second-hand store for a dirt cheap change of clothes and a duffel bag, and he was on his way to the train station.

To call Lon Djinn crowded would be akin to calling the ocean moist. There were so many people that the traditional shoulder-to-shoulder sidewalks and perpetually clogged streets were simply not enough. Not only did hovercars mean that the airspace over the main road was at least as congested as the surface, but a series of elevated walkways along the outside walls of the towering buildings, so called skywalks, gave the whole city the look of a shopping mall. One would think that spending any time at all as a courier would have led Lex to some level of tourism prowess, but language and pedestrian navigation skills eluded him. With the help of a translation program in his slidepad, Lex managed to coax enough information from the busy people on the streets and the new age hieroglyphics scattered among the signs to find the rail station.

Almost instantly, Lex could feel that something was off. He'd made his way down to one of the lower levels, to the commuter lockers so that he could drop off the case and collect his fee. Locker areas tended to share some features regardless of their location. One was the distinctive odor that develops in areas where travelers keep their things. That was present in abundance. Another was homeless people. Between the roof overhead, the lack of business hours, the cheap storage, and the high traffic, transit locker rooms ended up as last chance motels for the financially disadvantaged. But right now there wasn't a beggar in sight. That meant that either Lon Djinn had experienced a socioeconomic epiphany and solved the homeless problem once and for all, or something had scared them away. Bums were the canary in the coalmine when it came to law enforcement. It didn't take long to spot the three plainclothes agents. Being observant and inconspicuous at the same time is a tough trick, and these guys hadn't quite mastered it. No points for guessing which locker they were keeping a close eye on.

Lex kept walking, passing through the locker room and hoping that it he wasn't obviously avoiding eye contact with the cops. He stopped at a snack machine so that it wouldn't look as though he was passing through for no reason. A wave of his slidepad netted him a candy bar with a picture of a crab on the wrapper, which he dearly hoped was a mascot and not an ingredient. From there he took a few twisty turns and ducked into the most fragrant bathroom he'd ever been brave enough to step into.

"Oh, come ON!" he muttered.

Missing were the standard "sit-down" toilets that nature had intended. In their place were the porcelain holes in the floor that Lex was fairly certain existed exclusively to mock tourists. The last few patrons evidently hadn't been up to the sharpshooting challenge, either. There was, however, a handicapped stall. He dove inside and locked the door.

"Okay, okay. This is bad," Lex muttered as near to silently as he could, "This is bad. Can't deliver the case, can't get my money. Don't panic. They might not know who I am. I'll just ditch the delivery, get the hell out of dodge, and then... what? Lie low for the rest of my life? I don't even know

what they're after... But I'm gonna find out!"

He dug into his duffel bag and pulled out the box Blake had been holding for him. It had taken a lot of research and a couple of weeks of sifting auction sites, but he'd finally managed to score an all frequencies decrypting receiver. If the sales pitch could be believed, this baby could sniff the airwaves and decode all conventional police and security bands, and since it was receive-only, it was undetectable. Lex had hoped to test it under less extreme circumstances, but if those cops were talking about him, he needed to know.

The box had been the size of a lunchbox, but once he'd torn apart the packaging he was left with something that looked like a pack of cigarettes with a low resolution screen on the side and an old fashioned wired earpiece along with a haystack of assorted adapter wires. He powered it up, and it revealed a readout of all of the relevant radio signals. A few security bands, a few corporate ones, and one law enforcement. He slipped the earpiece into place, selected the police band, and... was struck with a flood rapidfire mandarin.

"Son of a-"

He sorted through the tangle of wires until he found one that fit his slidepad and activated the translation program. Once it started to spit out English, he put the device to his ear.

"... transport hub in the vicinity of Long Genius all the staff. We've got the news that a suspect has been at a lower level vending machines, locker room C1 area using a looked at account. Being the lookout for the more than average height white man of suspicion. Image to follow."

He stared blankly for a moment.

"Stupid cheap translator app! Uh... okay. A looked at account... a watched account. VC must be watching my bank account activity... Vending machines... Oh my god."

Lex reached into his pocket and pulled out the crab bar. He'd bought it with the slidepad, which meant not only did they know he was here, they knew he was trying to drop off the package, since he was right by the drop site. Which meant they knew he still HAD the package. This was bad. This was very bad. He grabbed his duffel, strapped it to his back, and rushed out of the bathroom. All the while he kept the slidepad held to his ear as though he were in a conversation. It still spat nothing but mangled Chinese-to-English translations in low quality text-to-speech, but it was better than nothing.

"Take it easy, take it easy," he muttered out loud, "Don't run. They'll know you're onto them if you run. You'll look suspicious. Move slow, look calm. Once you are out in this crowded mess of a city, you'll be able to lose them. Just try to make it out one of the lower exits."

"Image likeness having been received. Make obstructed the exits of lower level," squawked the computerized approximation of the police dispatcher.

"Okay, then, upper exits," he corrected.

The now fugitive pilot's attempts at subtlety weren't achieving a very

high degree of success. Perhaps it was because he was sweating bullets. More likely it was because he was a foot taller than almost everyone around him and had a cheap duffel bag hung awkwardly behind him while he yammered to himself in a foreign language. Chances are the police would have been keeping a close eye on him even if he didn't perfectly fit the description of a suspect. Even now, cops uniformed and not were beginning to sift their way through the churning station-goers toward him. The slidepad was switched to speaker and shoved in his pocket as he weighed his options. It didn't take very long, because it wasn't a very long list. When he tried to turn down a slightly less crowded hall, one of the cops shouted. He didn't understand the order, but that hardly mattered. All it meant was that it was time for him to drop the inconspicuous act and default to what he did best. Escape.

Using reflexes honed during four years of changing class in a high school with three times as many students as it was built for, Lex slid between the confused patrons without losing a step. He managed to put a fair amount of space between himself and the pursuers before another handful of badges appeared at the opposite end of the hall. Their guns weren't out. No officer with more than a day of training would ever be stupid enough to draw a weapon in a crowded train station. The ensuing panic and stampede would kill more people than the bullets ever could. Instead, they rested their hands conspicuously on their pistols, edging sideways with their eyes locked on him. There was no chance he could slip by them, and the way back was even better protected.

Lex scanned his surroundings. Along the wall to his left was a section of floor roped off for maintenance. The tiles looked like there was some sort of water damage, and caution tape formed a protective perimeter around it, strung between narrow stands with heavy, stable bases. Beside the cordoned area was a service door. He dove for it. A rattle of the handle revealed that it was, predictably, locked. He grabbed the nearest of the tape stands, pulling down the entire row as a result. The sudden clatter of metal sent a startled shockwave through the crowd, clearing the area around him and tripping up the approaching authorities. After carefully logging that lucky little discovery for future use, he made use of the extra elbow room to swing the hefty base of the stand at the knob, breaking it off wrenching the door open. He disappeared inside.

The maintenance stairs were completely empty, at least for the moment. Lex took full advantage, sprinting up them three at a time. It didn't take long for his lungs to start burning and his legs to gently remind him that, if vigorous activity had been in the plan, half a week in a cockpit and a belly-load of mystery meat weren't the best preparation. Stopping wasn't an option, though. The translation in his pocket rattled off floor numbers and lockdown orders as quickly as he could reach new landings. Over his heaving breath he heard a key code being punched into the door ahead. As it opened, he drove his heel into it, slamming it shut again and hurling his would be captor

backwards.

In the back of his mind, somewhere buried in the panic, a voice of reason pointed out that there generally weren't many exits on the upper floors of a train station, but he shoved it aside. Judging from the pounding of feet on the stairs below, up was the only option. There was still hope, wasn't there? There could be a window open, or a fire exit, couldn't there? There damn well better be, because he sure as hell wasn't going go to jail because of a stupid crab candy bar. Finally, he was out of steps, facing a final door that was miraculously free from the sounds of commotion on the other side. He gave it a solid whack with the tape stand he hadn't had the good sense to drop ten floors ago. The flimsy, low bid security door swung open. He'd made it through and wedged it shut with the battered remnants of the stand before his brain registered what he'd managed to step in to... or rather, out of.

The door had led to a metal catwalk that ran a short distance along the outer wall. His mad rush had managed to bring him all the way to the top of the fifteen story station. Whoever had designed the building must have valued form over function, because evidently a petty little thing like a safety railing would have ruined the aesthetic. Instead there was a narrow rung ladder leading a few dozen feet to the roof, and a steep drop to the sidewalk below, the station being one of the few buildings in the area without skywalks wrapped around it. The multilevel traffic jam hovered, jostled, and shuddered forward at a snail's pace just below him. Behind, the door was beginning to rattle with the blows of police eager to apprehend.

"Okay, Lex. Let's think this through," he reasoned with himself, "You had a good run. The cops won this one, that's all. How bad could jail be, right? Three hots and a cot. They couldn't hold me for more than a few years, but at least I'd be alive... Except... Sarah Jones. She was the only other person who handled this case, and now she's dead. They killed her, and a whole shuttle of other people just for mailing it... I'm as good as dead if they catch me."

The door released a cheap "ping" noise, sending a bolt twirling into passing traffic and warning that he didn't have much more time to weigh his options. He shuffled up to the edge and watched the bolt bounce and ricochet its way through the afternoon rush, causing expensive nicks and scratches to a dozen cars before he lost sight of it. A plan came to mind, though calling it a plan was perhaps a bit charitable. It was only marginally less suicidal than turning himself in to VectorCorp, but he wasn't exactly spoiled for options.

Taking a few steps back, Lex made sure that the duffel was as secure as he could make it. A checklist formed in his head and he began to mark things off. Laces: tied. Belt: Buckled. Pockets: Zipped Shut. Fingers: Crossed. He took a deep breath, ran for three long strides, and hurled himself off of the edge just as the police managed to break the door open.

Some things are difficult to fully appreciate until you've put them into the proper context. Twenty feet, for instance, doesn't sound like much of a drop.

And ten feet seems like a fairly short distance to jump. When the twenty foot drop is the top two stories of a fifteen story building, though, and the ten foot jump is to the roof of a temporarily stationary hovercar, the distance can suddenly seem very significant indeed. It didn't take a fancy safety system to make time slow to a crawl this time. His brain did it all on its own, evidently deciding that if this was the last thing it was going to experience, it might as well be thorough.

Approximately three lifetimes later, he came slamming down on the roof of a delivery truck. It took three painful bounces and a few feet of sliding before his brain was willing to take enough attention away from the very important task of screaming profanities to actually try to hang on. By then he'd run out of truck. Traffic had looked like a solid wall of bumper to bumper gridlock from above, but somehow he managed to fall through two more levels of it before landing on a mid size commuter car with a roof rack. One hand wrapped in a death grip around the rack while the other did a cursory check to see if any bones were protruding from his nice new outfit.

When he was sure that all body parts were present, accounted for, and reasonably intact, it was time to figure out what was the next step in his master plan. Thus far it had been surprisingly educational. For one, he'd learned that things didn't work out in real life they way they did in the movies. Rather than the car he landed on continuing along and carrying him to freedom, this particular motorist stopped suddenly. Most of the people behind him stopped suddenly too, and those that didn't do so immediately did so shortly afterward when they collided with their more attentive brethren. Thus, his clever escape plan now consisted of trying to get air back into his lungs as he watched the traffic ahead pull away.

Another lesson he was learning was that, when it comes to cursing someone out, you can't go wrong with Chinese. The owner of the car he'd landed on was delivering a scathing tirade that was only slightly softened by the fact that Lex couldn't understand a word of it. There was a sound that he did understand, however. Sirens. He glanced up to see flashing lights weaving their way in from above.

"Sorry!" he blurted, before leaping from this roof to the next.

After a few sloppy landings, Lex started to get a feel for the footing you could expect from car hoods, windshields, and roofs as he made his way across the crowded roadway. The slowly flowing column of cars became a cacophony of exotic profanities, blaring horns, and wailing sirens. Rubberneckers gawking at the lunatic jumping from roof to roof soon became the next stepping stone. He swung from bumpers, vaulted over luggage, and cracked sunroofs in his mad attempt to get close enough to something stationary to escape. Fortunately for him, the chaos he was stirring up made it damn near impossible for the police to get close to him.

Finally a sporty coupe that had tried and failed to avoid him drifted off road and scraped against a third floor skywalk across the street from the

station, which he eagerly scrambled onto. Planting his feet on something not actively trying to get out from underneath him for the first time in too long, he took off at a sprint toward what he hoped was the shipyard with his loaner. A crowded city, particularly one that had just recently had a commotion the likes of which he'd just caused, is a terrible place to have to chase down a suspect. Even sticking out as he was, any time he caught a glimpse of a cop, all he had to do was duck down an alley or two and they were long gone. Through some miracle of bureaucratic oversight, the police hadn't sent anyone ahead to the local shipyards to keep an eye out for him. Maybe the local cops didn't think he was worth it. Regardless, he threw a fistful of chips at the clerk, jumped into the cockpit of his ship, and skipped every start up procedure he could forgo without causing the engines to explode.

"Warning. Warning. Optimal flow rate not achieved. Engine efficiency below fifteen percent," informed the ship.

"I know, I know," Lex muttered.

The well maintained ship lurched up and out of the docking bay amid various complaints and groans. Cold-starting a ship like that was a bad idea for several reasons, but tops among them was the dismal power output of an engine that wasn't up to speed. Until the DAR warmed up, it was like trying to fly a refrigerator. But it was only a matter of time before they realized it might be a good idea to lockdown the shipyards, and a flying fridge still had a better chance than a grounded ship.

He was just shuddering up above the city when his luck ran thin. A pair of police cruisers rose up from between the skyscrapers and hailed him. The cruisers were little more than slightly oversized hovercars with heftier engines and a blue and white paint job. The two of them combined were almost as big as the DAR by itself, but that didn't mean that they couldn't cause trouble for him. When you're working against gravity, even minor collisions can cause serious issues, so a pair of little ships teaming up against a big one could easily disable or ground it if they hit the right spots. They transmitted a prerecorded, all purpose "Stop, you are under arrest" message that cycled through about fifteen different languages, giving instructions on how best to avoid getting into any further trouble. Lex had heard it so many times over the course of his rather rebellious life that he'd nearly memorized it. Evidently, if he were to allow the law enforcement professional or professionals in pursuit to escort him to the nearest retention center or processing facility he would be treated fairly and his cooperation would be taken into consideration. As tempting as the offer was, he was inclined to try his luck.

Again, he ran through his options. He was in a temporarily crippled ship in a transit hub on a foreign planet, with two low-atmosphere ships, presumably unarmed, looking to bring him in. Compared to recent history, this was going to be a breeze. All he had to do was stay mobile until his borrowed ship caught its breath. Ideally he should do some fancy footwork through the train yard below, but since that was effectively an act of terrorism,

he decided against it. Likewise, doing a reckless, high speed pursuit through one of the cities was out. Doing that in a limo was one thing, where the worst he could do is total a few cars. The DAR could probably take down a building, if he didn't handle it right. This was going to have to be a straight up dogfight, minus the guns... he hoped.

Once it became clear that asking nicely wasn't working, the police started to run through the standard operating procedure. Having a rigid set of well practiced procedures was great for cops because it meant that they were able to coordinate well and really hone their craft. It also made them predictable. They jockeyed into their positions, setting up what in two dimensions would have been a PIT maneuver. The addition of the Z axis made things more complicated, but an enterprising offensive driver had figured something out. It involved nudging a ship or hovercar into an awkward orientation, thus forcing the pursue-ee to either waste time correcting or go plowing into the ground.

The rearmost ship edged up to Lex's still puttering ship and made ready give him a shove. Just as he juiced the throttle, Lex pivoted the DAR on its side. The cop missed and ended up rocketing forward, nearly ramming his partner. While they were trying to work out what happened. He took a ninety degree turn and pushed the wheezing engine for all it was worth. They eventually took a wide turn and approached on either side of him to try to line him up for another try, but as soon as they matched speed he cut the throttle and fired the retro rockets, bringing him to a nearly complete stop. When the police tried to loop around, he simply flared up again, whizzing between them and choosing a random direction.

The "chase" continued in this fashion for a few more maneuvers before the cops realized that they were outclassed and took a moment to call for reinforcements. They were quick to respond, and there were a lot of them. Aside from a few dozen more cruisers, there were two big, sturdy, space-capable Interceptors, essentially younger siblings of the late Betsy. The good news was that they hadn't had the irresponsibly large engines grafted onto them like Betsy had. The bad news was that this chase wasn't going to stop at the edge of the atmosphere anymore.

"This... isn't going as well as I'd hoped..."

The console of the ship bleeped and its voice announced, "Optimal flow rate achieved. Engine status: Optimal."

"That's more like it!" Lex roared triumphantly, setting a course and putting the pedal to the metal.

The better part of the Lon Djinn police force followed suit, but with the DAR engines back online, it was only the pair of Interceptors that managed to keep pace, and only just. The rush of wind outside started to die away as the atmosphere started to thin out, allowing Lex to pour on a bit more speed without his ship spontaneously combusting. For a moment, it looked like he was actually going to get away without any more shenanigans, but his ship's sensors had two things to say about it. First, there was another pair of ships

ahead, part of an orbital patrol. Second, all four ships were far enough away from populated areas to activate short range weaponry. Without thinking, Lex aimed for the nearest orbital checkpoint. They couldn't shoot at him if he was close enough to civilians. Yes, technically he was using a human shield, but when you are running for your life, that sort of thing suddenly seems a lot less contemptible.

They took a few pot shots with "plasma flak" charges, short range rockets that scattered white hot specks of energy that would stall his electrical system if he hit too much of it, but that fizzled out after a few seconds, leaving nothing behind to cause collateral damage. Think "spike strip in space." He managed to steer clear of both. By the time they were ready to line him up for a fourth attempt, though, the checkpoint was in sight and the weapons disengaged. In seconds, Lex was weaving though the ships at the checkpoint, the Interceptors whisking along the outside edge of the line. He steered with one hand and fumbled for the transponder with the other. An idea had come to mind, but the timing was going to be awfully tight.

He was getting close to the end of the line now. The innocent bystanders were getting fewer and further between and the Interceptors were getting closer. A massive freight hauler was just coming in. Once they were past it, it was nothing but open space, and anything was fair game. Lex managed to flip the trash ejector open, cram the DAR transponder into it, and seal it shut. Just a few more seconds before those guys on his tail would be willing to warm up their guns again. He prepared the field generator for the FTL jump. With a tight double tap of his maneuvering rockets he managed to put the hauler between himself and the Interceptors. The very instant the system gave him the go ahead, he tapped the trash eject, sending the external transponder through a series of narrow airlocks and out into open space. A half second later he punched the FTL button. When the Interceptors made it past the hauler, their sensors told them that Lex was heading along at roughly the same speed as he had been. Their eyes told them he had vanished. Presumably they eventually caught up with the ejected transponder, but by then he was long, long gone.

Chapter 12

After the customary three random jumps to make sure he wasn't followed, then a dozen more for the sake of paranoia, Lex took a deep breath and tried to gather his wits. In hindsight, it was an act of pure optimism to imagine he could have dropped off the case and been done with it, but when things are looking hopeless, the tendency is to revert to what you know best. Now, with that long shot put firmly to rest, he had nothing left but to face facts. They knew who he was, they wanted the case, and they killed the last person who had it. He probably hadn't helped matters with his highly conspicuous escape just now, but once again, the last person who had the case was dead. When death is already the consequence, the thought of "making it worse" seems a little ridiculous. So the question wasn't "What is the worst that can happen?" The question was "What am I going to do about it?"

There was no doubt it was VectorCorp that was after him, but even THEY couldn't be everywhere at once, and judging from the fact that they'd let the relatively inept local police make a grab for him, they didn't feel comfortable throwing their weight around in public. Not yet, at least. That meant that, whatever the reason was that they wanted him, it was something they didn't want played out in broad daylight. Which raised another issue. He didn't even know what it was that had driven them to such lengths. Lex's eyes turned to the duffel.

Ever since he had learned of Ms. Jones' death, he'd tried to avoid even looking at the silver case, as though her fate was somehow contagious, and could be avoided by minimizing exposure. At this point, though, he was already in over his head. Digging his grave any deeper hardly made a difference. The least he could do was find out what he was dealing with. One by one he peeled off the strips of duct tape that were holding the battered suitcase shut, revealing the single feeble and damaged lock that hadn't completely failed. Two good shots with the heel of his hand dislodged the twisted clip, and the case slowly squeaked open.

Lex wasn't sure what he had been expecting to find. Half of the time, exchanges like this ended up being blackmail articles; soiled underwear, compromising photos on a data drive, things like that. Judging from the amount of resources being dumped into the retrieval of this particular delivery, it was likely a good deal more substantial. A part of him had been hoping for something exciting, like vials of biological agents or perhaps the launch codes of some globe shattering weapon. What he found instead, to say the least, defied expectations.

It was a short stack of pages, hard copy printouts with some handwritten notes. They were gathered into two bundles. The first was a thick packet, cluttered with charts and dense scientific language. Lex didn't understand half of what the pages said, but he recognized enough buzzwords and symbols to know that it had to do with stars, a stellar survey or the like. There were a few

hundred stars detailed in total. Most of them had the sort of alphanumeric gibberish for a name that was tremendously helpful if you were a stellar cartographer and utterly incomprehensible if you were anything else. The information about each star was incredibly technical. Just about the only portion of it that had any sort of meaning to Lex was the location coordinates. The rest had to do with precise mass, magnetosphere fluctuation cycles, etc.

The second packet was a handful of shipping manifests with various components circled. The manifests themselves were pretty standard, the full contents of one of the massive cargo haulers that made the rounds throughout the galaxy. The indicated shipments didn't seem to have an awful lot in common. They ranged from mundane stuff, like reels of copper wire and fiber bundles, to slightly more niche items, like superconductive coils, and a few hundred tons of other miscellaneous equipment. They shipped from easily a hundred different companies, on behalf of a hundred different companies. The one thing many of them shared, though, was a destination. A planet called Operlo. The name rang a bell for some reason. More than a few were addressed directly to a construction company there.

"This is it?" he ranted, "This is reason enough to murder people? Fifty pages of order tracking and star measurements?!"

He riffled through the pages a second time, just to make sure he hadn't missed something worthwhile, like a murder confession from the CEO of VectorCorp or maybe some sort of fiendish plan for galactic conquest. Nothing but statistics and ship manifests. This wasn't just disappointing, it was devastating. If the case had held something of actual value, he would have had options. He could have held it for ransom, or used it as a bargaining chip. To do that, though, he would need to know who would have wanted it, and he couldn't imagine anyone in a position to help him out of this mess caring in the least about this worthless mound of paper. All he'd managed to learn by opening the case was a pair of vague likelihoods. First, it was sensitive data. That was pretty much the only reason to print something out these days. Delivering it as hard copy meant that it was impossible for network filters and sniffers to pick up on the data. The other hint was the address of the construction company. Since it was the only semblance of a lead he had, Lex punched in the coordinates, plotted out a course, and jumped to FTL.

He managed to reach Operlo fairly quickly, but not because it was nearby. Operlo wasn't near anything. That was exactly why it was so quick. In crowded areas, space was crisscrossed with VectorCorp routes which, as a freelancer, Lex had to avoid. Trying to keep clear of patrols around high traffic areas meant doing an awful lot of speeding up and slowing down, which translated to wasted time and energy, and rarely reaching maximum acceleration. Operlo had one lonely lane heading to and from it, which meant that even freelancers had a straight shot, all sprint and no juke. Of course, isolation carries with it a few other consequences.

Some planets are named after ancient gods, or at least the star they orbit and a number. Operlo got its name because the mining consortium that owned it auctioned off the naming rights to a chemical company, who named it after their new floor polish, then promptly went out of business. There wasn't an ounce of romance or prestige in its history. The mines didn't even produce anything particularly exotic; mostly just iron, zinc, and tin. For a long time, the only people who lived there were the miners and a few associated industries, and the only people who visited were the cargo haulers. It was an isolated crevice, far away from anything resembling law enforcement. Basically it was the planetary equivalent of a dark alley. It was thus inevitable that it would attract a certain type of person. Operlo wasn't a vacation spot. It was a place to come if you didn't want to be bothered. As such, there wasn't a fancy check-in post monitoring traffic. Likely there had been some attempts, but these days about forty percent of the population was in some way associated with organized crime. That doesn't create an environment conducive to administrative oversight.

Unlike Tessera, Operlo wasn't exactly filled to the brim with bustling industry and vast urban centers. The planet was practically deserted, and for that matter, practically a desert. A bit larger than the planet Earth, it had a population in the millions, scattered mostly along two liveable belts near each of the poles. The rest of the planet had surface temperatures that weren't quite high enough to make human life impossible, but they did make it miserable. All of that sun made for cheap, plentiful solar power, though. The construction company's headquarters and shipping hub was located about three hundred miles north of a cluster of solar collectors, right at the Southern Fringe of the Northern Habitable Zone. As an illustration of the general lack of personality on the part of the city planners during Operlo's development, those weren't geological terms, they were the actual names on the map. The full address of the receiving building was "685 East 45.5554 Longitude Drive, Southern Fringe, NHZ." Not a community of poets.

He brought down the DAR in the shipyard which, despite the fact there didn't seem to be any workers about, seemed to be a fairly popular destination. Virtually all of the dusty, concrete landing pads were occupied by ships that looked a little too new and a little too expensive to be parked at a sun-bleached construction site. An automated system latched various mooring lines in place, but for the moment, Lex wasn't interested in going anywhere. The sun beating down on a dusty landscape covered in scrub grass and twiggy trees was blinding. Already he could see the wavy shimmer of rising heat coming off of the fuselage. The external thermometer read 153 degrees Fahrenheit. All he had to wear was his flight suit, which he was wearing now, and that cheap outfit he'd picked up in Lon Djinn. Neither was really appropriate for a desert. That was the trouble with globe hopping. You never seemed to have an appropriate wardrobe.

After a few minutes, a hover cart with a sad little canopy started to kick

up dust as it approached. Aside from establishing that he had run out of time to stall getting out of the air conditioning, this reminded Lex of a key aspect to his visit that he'd forgotten to work out: The actual reason for the visit. He knew why he was there, but whoever was going to knock on the window in a few seconds was going to need to know, and he couldn't very well say, "Someone is trying to kill me, and I think someone here might know why." As a pair of yard workers who looked like glazed hams wrapped in burlap hauled themselves out of the cart, Lex dug one of the manifests out of the brief case, stowed it, and popped the cockpit hatch.

The heat hit him like a balled up fist, and the two workers looked like they were eager to do the same. Being forced to venture out into sauna heat has a way of souring one's attitude toward the parties responsible. The larger of the two, a gentleman with a name tag reading "Hoss" stepped up to Lex. He was wearing khaki shorts and a matching shirt. The shirt was open a few more buttons than was really socially acceptable, revealing a white undershirt with a horrifying yellow stain. The entire ensemble was sweated through, and with the addition of mirrored sunglasses, appeared to be a uniform, since his unhappy partner, "GreenMeat," was dressed precisely the same, right down to the yellowed wife beater.

"State your business," Hoss said in a voice far too young and squeaky to belong to someone on the unhappy side of 350 lbs.

"Yeah, my bosses sent me out here about some... Converters or inverters or whatever?" Lex said, squinting at the manifest in his hand, "Some electronics delivery from a while back. I'm supposed to talk to a clerk or something."

The worker snatched the sheet, looked it over, then handed it off to his second in command.

"Call it in," he said.

GreenMeat pressed a finger to his ear and muttered a few numbers off of the sheet. Then the three of them stood waiting and sweating. In Lex's case, the sweat was motivated as much by his generalized anxiety about the whole situation as it was by the heat. Finally, second banana piped up.

"That's one of those big projects. They say he has to talk to that second tier number cruncher in the west end," GreenMeat said.

"Heh! Aren't they getting audited? Security or something? Man, do I love when the pencil jockeys screw the pooch!" Hoss said gleefully, "Okay, you see that complex w-a-a-a-a-ay on the other side of the shipyard?"

Lex squinted until he could just make out a dark patch of wavy desert heat between the rows of ships and hovercars.

"Yeah, I think so," he said, not entirely convinced it wasn't a mirage.

"Go in there, show the hardass at the desk the manifest, and ask for shipping accounts," Hoss instructed, wedging himself alongside GreenMeat in the glorified golf cart.

"That's like two miles away, and there aren't any closer parking spots.

Could you give me a lift?" Lex asked.

"Yep," replied Hoss.

He then promptly rode the cart away in the wrong direction, laughing a greasy little laugh.

"… Asshole," Lex muttered.

Briefly he considered piloting the ship over to the building and just touching it down someplace closer, docking bay or no, but he quickly decided against it. It was extremely illegal, but something told him it wasn't the police he was going to have to worry about here, and chances are that the sort of vigilante justice that would be levied upon the borrowed ship would be much worse than a fine anyway. He was just going to have to walk. After cramming everything he could fit into his flight suit's pockets in hopes of guaranteeing he wouldn't forget something and have to come back for it, he tied the shirt from his Lon Djinn ensemble around his head and set off.

Forty-five scorching minutes later, he stepped into the mercifully climate controlled office complex. His skin felt positively crispy, and his boots were making an unpleasant squish with each step, thanks to the half gallon of sweat he could feel pooling around his toes. The young Indian woman at the desk watched him warily as he stalked into the center of the room, spotted a water cooler, and practically ran to it.

"Can I help you, sir?" she asked in a professional tone.

"One minute," Lex said, dropping to his knees and running the water over his head.

When he felt as though the temperature of his scalp was no longer in the boiling range, he stood and looked to the receptionist. She was in fairly traditional business attire, though there were a few aspects of it that were a little bit outside the norm. The gray business dress hugged her curves much better than one would imagine was acceptable for an office environment, and the curves were quite pleasing indeed. She had her jet black hair pulled back in a tight bun, and a pair of wire rimmed glasses were perched on her pert little nose, a gold chain dangling from each earpiece and disappearing behind her neck. The receptionist's face was nothing short of gorgeous, and held in a practiced look of professional detachment. Her dark skin and flawless features, combined with the business suit, gave her the look of a Hindu goddess who had just received her MBA. Running a hand through his soaking wet hair and wishing he'd noticed he was dealing with a beautiful woman before he'd made a fool of himself, Lex tried to scrape together the shreds of his dignity.

"I'm here to talk to, uh, shipping accounts," he said, pulling the now disturbingly moist manifest from the pocket of his fight suit.

She took the document, not for a moment betraying a hint of disgust about handling a piece of paper that had been marinating in Lex's juices for the better part of an hour. A few gestures on her datapad – the larger, less portable cousin to the slidepad – managed to prompt the first change in expression

since his arrival, as her eyebrow raised a fraction of an inch. A final gesture brought the chirp of an intercom system.

"Mr. Hendricks to reception. Escort to waiting room six," she said, turning to address Lex, "Mr. Hendricks will be with you shortly. He will show you to our waiting room while we consult the proper files."

"Sounds good," Lex said, reaching for the manifest.

"Mr. Hendricks will be needing this. I'll just hand it to him when he arrives," she said, placing the seasoned sheet of paper into a manila envelope, "May I have your name for our visitors records, please?"

Lex froze.

"What do you need my name for?"

"For our visitors records," she repeated.

"Oh, right. That makes sense. Uh, you can call me, uh," Lex stuttered. It had suddenly struck him that by now his name might have found its way to some watch lists and perhaps he should have prepared an alias of some kind during the several days he'd spent coming here.

"You can record him when he exits, Miss Misra," said a rail thin man as he entered.

His hair was black, and his face and accent were both vaguely European. He was wearing an immaculate white shirt with a black tie. Black suspenders held up a pair of high quality dress slacks, and his shoes were polished to a high gloss. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, revealing forearms so wiry they looked like they were braided together out of rawhide. The man's face was long, carefully shaved, and showed a handful of noticeable scars. Topping it all off was a pair of gray eyes that stared so intensely, Lex was fairly sure he could burn a hole through a cinder block. He couldn't have radiated "ex-military" more clearly if he was wearing combat fatigues.

"Yes sir, Mr. Hendricks," said the receptionist, handing the folder over.

"This way, sir," Hendricks said.

Without waiting, the surly man walked crisply from whence he came. Lex sloshed after him. Automatic doors opened and closed a handful of times as they wound their way through half a dozen different hallways, working deeper and deeper into the office complex. As they progressed, the sterile look of scattered cubicles became less frequent, replaced instead with downright antiseptic white concrete walls.

"Kind of a long way in for a waiting room," Lex said, his voice echoing in the empty hall.

"We don't get many visitors," Hendricks said.

"… Then why do you need six waiting rooms?" Lex asked.

The question hung in the air for a few moments before they came to a door. Hendricks waved a slidepad over a sensor and the door hissed open.

"Wait inside. Accounting will be with you shortly," Hendricks said.

Lex glanced into the room.

"That's waiting room six?"

Hendricks nodded.

"I don't think I want to wait in waiting room six. There aren't any magazines. Or potted plants. Or net terminals. Or windows. Or witnesses," Lex said.

In fact, there was nothing but a pair of wooden chairs, a metal table, and a surveillance camera in each corner. No doubt people did a lot of waiting in a room like that, but he didn't want to think about what they were waiting for.

"You know what? I'll just go."

"Step. Inside," Hendricks replied, slowly and deliberately.

He didn't say it in an overtly threatening way, but something in his posture suggested that right now, inside was the safer place to be. Lex entered the room and took the seat on the opposite side of the table facing the door.

"Accounting will be with you momentarily," he said bleeping the door shut.

For several minutes, Lex sat, quietly assessing his life. His finely tuned instincts, which he seemed to have made it a nasty habit to ignore, were telling him to make a break for it. His common sense chimed in a moment later to point out that, ignoring the security glass, security cameras, and labyrinthine halls, the chances were very good that a two mile sprint in 150 degree heat would do a lot more damage than whatever these people might have in mind ... probably. So he waited and tried to plan out what he was going to do.

The wait lasted long enough for the sweaty flight suit to dry into a greasy, uncomfortable mass of synthetic fabric. Finally the door hissed open without even a hint of approaching footsteps. The room was soundproofed. That wasn't a good sign. Through the door stepped a large-ish woman in frumpy business casual. She had a nervous look on her face, which was no doubt largely due to the fact that whoever had sent her had felt she needed two meaty escorts, both men, both the sort who wouldn't have looked out of place in a natural history exhibit.

"Yes, hello, Mister..." she said, tucking a datapad under one arm and extending the other for a shake.

Lex briefly considered giving her an alias, but it was pointless. Any system with a camera and a decent network connection would be able to face match him in 30 seconds anyway.

"Trevor Alexander," he said with defeat, "Call me Lex."

"Lex. Okay. I'm Miss Morris. I'm a supply and stock manager. I understand you have a problem with our inventory?"

"Yeah. I was asked by my superiors, who know that I'm here and will be expecting a report," he said, eying a camera, "to follow up on some items they had delivered."

"May I ask who your employers are, and what they suspect may be the problem?"

Lex closed his eyes and tried to remember what had been on the sheet

he'd handed over.

"That would be the... Triptech Dynamics. And they had a batch of... rectifiers they were worried about. Something about too many of them being delivered."

"Triptech Industries, you mean? And inverters?"

"Probably. Listen, I'm an independent agent. They send me around to do this so they don't have to. I've got like forty clients," he said, tapping his foot nervously.

Miss Morris tapped at her pad.

"Here we are. The shipment of inverters you've got circled on your manifest here was accepted on February 26th. Three dozen high efficiency, low resonance inverter assemblies. That is the proper amount, I believe," she said, flipping the pad in his direction.

He glanced down at it.

"Yeah, so it says, but I need to see them. You know. Count them."

"The shipment was signed off by both parties. I assure you, there was no mistake."

"Well, that's all well and good, but I still have to look at them. The bosses said that the shipment you got might have had some defective units."

"I was unaware of any recall being issued."

"Yeah, there wasn't. It was a very small batch. Just a dozen or so. I just need to take a look at the ones we delivered."

"Well, I think you'll find that the serial numbers are included in the receipt. You can just check that against your recall list."

"No, no I can't, because there is a secondary run number on the inside of the casing. That's the one I need."

Miss Morris eyed the pad before her, flustered.

"Sir, I'm afraid that is impossible. That shipment was months ago. Most of the inverter assemblies have already left storage for installation."

"Well then I'd say it is pretty darn important you let me go to the site and make sure they aren't going to overload, wouldn't you agree?"

"Why didn't you just wait and include this in the final pre-activation security audit of the Gemini Project tomorrow?" she asked.

"That will be all Miss Morris," squawked the intercom.

She quickly stood and left the room. The meaty cohorts remained. A moment later, Mr. Hendricks returned.

"Richard, Howard. Empty Mr. Alexander's pockets, please."

"Whoa, hey, hey! That's an invasion of privacy!" Lex said, standing up fast enough to fling the chair behind him.

Before he could take another step back, one of the neanderthal attendants grabbed his wrist and wrenched it up along the small of his back until his shoulder made an unpleasant noise, then shoved him forward, smacking his face against the table with a sound like raw chicken hitting the butcher's counter.

“No, Mr. Alexander. I’m afraid it is you who is invading privacy, and we are paid quite well to see that the affairs of our clients remain secure,” said Hendricks.

One by one, the pockets of Lex’s flight suit were emptied onto the table. This ended up taking quite a while, thanks to the sheer number of pockets and the fact that he had crammed everything he owned into them before leaving the ship. By the time they were finished and released his arm, there was a mound of food wrappers, scattered poker chips, his slidepad, and various other personal debris.

“Who do you work for?” Hendricks said, taking a seat and beginning to sort through the pile.

“I’m not working for anyone. You are reading WAY too deep into this.”

“You know that someone matching your description is wanted by most civilian law enforcement agencies due to an intellectual property theft charge by VectorCorp, I presume.”

“Intellectual property theft? THAT’S what they’re after me for?”

“Yes. And now you’ve come here attempting to gain access to our inventory and construction sites for the Gemini Project, and you claim we are reading too deeply into it?”

“Look, I don’t even know what the Gemini Project IS!”

Hendricks investigated the crab candy bar with a raised eyebrow before unearthing a small piece of card stock.

“And you won’t find out, because...”

He stopped short, inspecting the card closely and casting a doubtful glance at Lex. Finally he snapped his fingers and motioned for the henchmen to leave the room. He followed them, locking Lex in his painful gaze for a moment before shutting the door.

“O-kay then,” Lex remarked, rubbing his manhandled shoulder.

He returned the crab candy and slidepad to his pocket, along with anything else he felt like hanging onto, then swept the wrappers and garbage onto the floor as an act of protest. They might break his thumbs or whatever it was that shady criminal syndicates did, but they were damn well going to clean up his peanut butter wrappers, too.

Another few minutes passed before the door opened again. When it did, it revealed a man with a polo shirt, dress slacks, and a billion dollar smile.

“Mr. Alexander!” said Diamond Nick, like a man welcoming a friend from college, “Come to see me about that job offer?”

Chapter 13

"My card did have contact information on it. You didn't have to come in person, you know," said Patel, leading Lex back into the more hospitable portion of the complex as the pilot struggled come to terms with what was happening.

"Uh, yeah. So, did you make it to that meeting?" Lex said.

"That I most certainly did, thanks entirely to your skill in the chauffeur's art. If you'd told me you were a freelance courier I likely would have more aggressively pursued your employment."

"Who said I was a freelancer?"

"Mr. Alexander, you illustrated an almost supernatural talent behind the controls of a vehicle, then show up at my doorstep in a flight suit and smelling as though you haven't bathed properly in three weeks. Those are the two hallmarks of the profession."

"Hey! … It's more like ... twelve days."

"Pardon the overestimate. Now, what's this I hear about you intruding upon the affairs of my clients?"

"Hey, listen, I just need to check those inverters. I didn't-"

"Stick to piloting. Subterfuge and espionage are not among your skills. If you are checking up on a potential recall you have violated several dozen corporate and regulatory protocols. Now. My clients, the ones you've indicated in particular, expect a degree of discretion, and I do so aim to please. Thus, you are through prying. Are we clear?"

"Crystal."

"Excellent. Generally I would be inclined to treat a breach of this sort far more severely, but the meeting you helped me to attend on time was the source of a truly remarkable amount of income, so I am willing to suspend punishment," he remarked, approaching a panel on the wall and pressing a button, "Preethy? I will be in my office with a guest. Scotch and soda please."

He turned and raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, uh. Rum and coke."

"And a rum and coke. I rather think a tube of the skin cream would be appreciated as well."

"Yes sir," came the voice of the receptionist.

The trip through the building had taken them from the concrete dungeon, back through a maze of flimsy walled cubicles, and finally through a frosted glass door to a hallway that would look at home in a museum. The walls were paneled with dark stained hardwood. The floor was polished marble. Lining the hall, each in its own lighted recess, were works of art. There were wood carvings, statues, metal sculptures, and paintings. Lex wasn't an art buff, but some of them even he recognized. Judging from the quality, there was almost certainly a gifted forger involved. The real question was whether or not it was the museum that had the forgery.

"Open," Nicholas said.

The door opened quietly into an office triple the size of Lex's apartment.

"If you don't mind, take a seat on the wooden chair. The usual guest chair is leather and I would rather not learn what sort of lingering character you might lend to it, judging from the state of your outfit," the wealthy businessman said, indicating an antique chair at one corner of his desk.

"Don't stink up the fancy chair. I gotcha," Lex said, carefully sitting down on the antique. Chances were very good that if he broke it, he would have to sell everything he owned to pay for the replacement.

No sooner had he taken a seat than a second door opened to allow the young woman from the front desk to enter bearing a tray. The pleasing way that her immodest business suit had traced her shape while she was seated had been noticeable. Seeing what it did for her while she was in motion was downright impossible to ignore. At some point a voice in his head pointed out that it was not nice to stare. A louder voice from further south overruled it. It was downright criminal to give something with a sway like that anything less than your full attention. It wasn't until his host spoke that he was jolted out of the decidedly primitive state of mind.

"Thank you, Preethy," he said, "This is Mr. Trevor Alexander."

"We met, briefly," she said simply.

"Just long enough for me to make an ass out of myself," Lex remarked.

"Yes. He was very efficient in that regard," she said, her precise, professional tone never wavering, "Will there be anything else, Mr. Patel."

"Nothing at the moment."

"Yes sir."

She placed the tray down and departed. Lex watched her go. Very intently.

"It may interest you to know that the young lady you are so eagerly observing is my niece," said a bemused Mr. Patel.

"... Yes... Yes that is very useful information," Lex said, picking up his drink and downing half of it in order to muster up the courage to make eye contact again.

"I thought it might be. Now then. Before we begin, let me -"

A tone drew Patel's attention to the pad on his desk.

"One moment," he said, snatching up the pad and thumbing a command, "William my boy, been waiting ages to hear from you!" He covered the device with is hand and spoke aside to Lex. "Oh, I'm terribly sorry, this is a rather important call. Won't be a moment. Make yourself at home, but don't try anything foolish."

He stood and marched briskly out of the room, oozing charisma as he went. "Yes, yes. All is ready. No problems whatsoever. Looking forward to meeting your man..."

Lex's instincts once again offered up the highly complex "run for your life" plan that they were so fond of, but he slapped it down. Best to stay calm.

Of the alarmingly long list of dangerous sociopaths that Lex had run into in the past few days, Patel was by far the most reasonable and stable. And at least the office was air conditioned. As his sun-baked mind tried to piece together a plan of action, he stood and looked over the walls.

Just as Patel was not the first man you might picture as the head of a crime syndicate, his office didn't seem to suit the role either. Granted, Lex didn't tend to spend much time envisioning the lairs of racketeers, but if he did, family vacation photos probably would have been fairly far down the list of expected decor. Nonetheless, dozens of frames were skillfully arranged, proudly showcasing images of a very large and very happy family. What little space that was not used to display snapshots was used instead to show off his other accomplishments. There were degrees, several of them. He had evidently won a "Small Businessman of the Year" award when he was younger, probably before he turned to a life of crime. There were news clippings regarding IPOs, plaques commemorating the ground breaking for new facilities, and a dozen other things that a CEO with a long and successful career would gladly show off. As a matter of fact, the only remotely criminal-looking thing was a clip depicting a courtroom scene and the headline "*Over six hundred collared in cross planet crackdown.*" Lex was glancing over the small print of the image when Patel returned.

"... Yes, yes, well, I'll certainly be keeping my eyes open. … Yes, and my mouth shut. You know me, William. I am nothing if not discrete. … Thank you. Good bye." He closed the message before muttering something unseemly under his breath. He then turned to his guest once more. "Sorry again, that man is a nightmare to get a hold of. Must leap at every opportunity. Find anything interesting? Ah, the crackdown! Yes, yes. That was quite a day for me."

"How so?"

"Mine is a competitive business, Mr. Alexander. Openings in the upper ranks are rare. That court case stirred things up quite a bit. Enough for a certain young upstart to get his foot in the door. Just look at those names. Francis Green, Malcolm Vincenzo, Little Carl Rodrigo..."

Lex's ears perked up.

"Little Carl. Carlito? Carlito Rodrigo?"

"Indeed. Heard of him, have you?"

"The name came up recently."

"Mmm. Small time gun runner. In your neighborhood, as I recall. Shame what happened to him."

"What happened?"

"They locked him up on some obscure regional law tucked away in the constitution of one of the third world nations he helped sell weapons to. It allowed them to charge him with the murders of anyone who was killed using weapons he was involved in delivering. Even after plea bargaining and helping the prosecution, the sentence was measured in centuries. Gun running

tends to cause one to accumulate enemies, as does turning informant, and that case locked him in the same facility with more than a few of them. The witness protection kept him away from the new enemies. It didn't do anything for the old. He died after a few months. Sharpened screw driver, which in that jail may as well be listed as natural causes. He left a wife and children behind, I believe."

"What happened to them?" Lex asked, though he suspected he knew the answer.

"Relocated, I suspect. New home, new identity."

Lex looked at the dateline and quickly did the math, though the alcohol slowed it down a bit. Rodrigo would have been testifying just about eleven years ago... The same year that Michella moved to his school...

"Enough reminiscing, though, back to business," proclaimed his host, clapping his hands and rubbing them vigorously together, "Take a seat."

Lex found his way to the antique chair and carefully sat down.

"I'm a very busy man, so I will lay it all out for you. VectorCorp has sent word out that you are under suspicion of industrial espionage, and that you are to be apprehended immediately. As I understand it, I was one of the few individuals to be given your name along with the description."

"Hey, now, I-" Lex objected, standing suddenly, then panicking to prevent the chair from falling. Patel cut him off.

"This will all go much more smoothly if you let me finish," he said sternly, "Now, take a seat."

"No way! You're going to turn me in!"

"I consider myself a reasonable man, Mr. Alexander, and I prefer to DEAL with reasonable men. You are in my complex, surrounded by my people. You don't really think you can run away, do you?"

"I'm re-e-e-a-ally good at running away."

"No doubt. However, have a seat, and we shall see if an escape is called for."

Lex glanced at the door. It was a long way away... and the hall on the other side was long, too. They'd taken a twisty path through and awful lot of floor space to get here, and in all likelihood there were a handful of big angry men with guns... and two miles of desert between him and the ship. He looked back to his host/captor. The businessman smiled and gave a little nod, gesturing toward the seat. Defeated, Lex sat down and finished his drink.

"Another?" asked Patel.

"Several," he said.

The well dressed man leaned forward to tap at a pad built into the desk.

"Sorry to bother you again so soon, Preethy, but would you please bring in the bottle of rum and a bottle of coke?" he asked.

"Yes sir, Mr. Patel," the voice replied quickly.

"Now, while we wait, might I suggest you apply some of that cream to your face. Otherwise you are likely to find the top few layers of your face

sitting on your pillow tomorrow like a pile of corn flakes," he advised.

"If you say so," Lex said, squirting the ointment from a prescription tube and making ready to swab it on his face, "You know, I appreciate the whole concerned fatherly figure routine, but can we just skip to the threats? I'm used to threats. I get threats from... Holy crap, this stuff works!"

Lex had managed to become used to the constant burning sensation in his exposed skin. It wasn't until it suddenly and completely vanished when he smeared the cream on did he remember that the surface of your body isn't supposed to feel like it was being spritzed with boiling water. He quickly slathered his hands, face, and the back of his neck with the cream. Predictably, he'd *just* managed to get every square inch of exposed skin coated with the stuff when the attractive young Miss Misra entered with the requested drink ingredients. This time she didn't quite fail to suppress an amused smirk as she placed down a tray containing a bottle of very expensive rum, a tall slender glass bottle of cola with the words 'cane sugar' etched into the glass, and a bucket of ice with tongs.

"… Well, as long as I don't have any dignity left to lose, did I miss a spot?" Lex asked, offering up the tube.

The receptionist took the tube gingerly with two fingers, dabbed a bit on her index finger, and ran it across the top of one of his ears. The smirk lingered for a moment longer before she straightened and restored the carefully cultivated business expression to her face.

"Will there be anything else?" she asked.

"Not at the moment. Thank you," Patel said.

Her heels clicked quickly to the door and down the hall. Lex turned to his host.

"Now, I believe you were interested in threats."

"Well, not interested, but I figure they are on the way, and I'd rather just get them over with," Lex said, wiping himself off with the towel that had been underneath the tube of ointment and pouring himself glass of rum with a drop or two of coke in it.

"Let us analyze the facts and see what sort of conclusion they lead us to, shall we?" he suggested, "VectorCorp claims you have stolen proprietary information with the intent to sell. Now, VC is with little doubt the best secured company in the galaxy. It would take someone of considerable skill to liberate anything of value from them. To be perfectly blunt, if what we've witnessed here is any example, your own talents in the ways of espionage are woefully inadequate."

"Can't argue with that."

"Now certainly, as a freelance courier, you could easily obtain information by simply opening the packages you deliver, but there is simply no reason for VC to ever entrust you or any other freelancer with sensitive data, as they run the largest and fastest distribution network in the galaxy, by a large margin."

"That they do. So where does that leave us?"

"Their story is highly suspect, wouldn't you agree?"

"Pff, yeah!"

"And yet, you managed to get your hands on this," Patel remarked, sliding the manila envelope containing the manifest onto the table, "Care to explain how you managed it?"

"My clients expect discretion, too."

"I'm sure they do, but at the moment you aren't in an ideal position to provide it."

"… That's true," he said, draining his glass, and adding with a shrug, "She's dead, anyway."

"Your client?"

"Yeah," he said, filling the glass again, this time skipping the coke completely, "Okay, here's how it went. I'm going to leave out names and such to protect the innocent and all that. I need money, so I take a job. The usual sort of thing, get this from point A to point B, don't look inside the briefcase. Done it a thousand times. I was having kind of a hard time in my life at the time, though it was frickin' sunshine and daffodils compared to the past few weeks. I had a lot on my mind, slipped up, wound up with a VC enforcer on my tail. He takes some shots at me. I try to shake him. I fail. He SHOOTS ME DOWN! At this point I'm nervous, but I figure, hey, get my ass to point B, get my money, and try to forget any of this ever happened. So I get down there and the goddamn cops are waiting for me. Normally I'd just give up, but the lady who gave me the job is dead, and I'm pretty sure VC did it, and VC are the ones that want me, so giving up would probably be the last decision I'd ever make. Since I don't really have any options, I pop the case, find your address, and here I am, stinking of skin balm, BO, and some of the best rum I've ever had."

"Quite a story," Patel said with sincerity.

"Damn straight."

Copious amounts of alcohol poured onto an empty stomach had begun to remove some of the mental checkpoints on the way from Lex's brain to his mouth, it should at this point be clear.

"I'm inclined to believe that your involvement in this is an unfortunate coincidence."

"Oh, so you believe my story, then."

"Veracity of your story notwithstanding, I sincerely doubt that anyone who would select rum as the drink of choice to steady his nerves would attempt something like this voluntarily."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You drink like a teenager. Rum and coke? You are one step away from putting an umbrella in your drink."

"Well, I'm sorry my panic drinking doesn't meet with your strict specifications."

"Now, unfortunately, your probable innocence doesn't change the fact that VC wants you, I have you, and I desire their good favor."

"I don't like where this is going..."

"This is what is going to happen, Mr. Alexander. You will remain here as our guest. You will give us all of the materials your late client had asked for you to deliver. Tomorrow, some security personnel will be arriving to audit our security. At that time I will turn over the materials, but I will recommend that you be remanded to my custody."

"If they don't go for it?"

"Then I hand you over."

"And if they do?"

"Then you will repay me by offering your freelancing services exclusively to me until such time as I consider your debt repaid."

"… Uh. No offense, but that doesn't sound like I've got much of a chance. And even if I did, I've been under the thumb of the mob before and it ruined my life. I don't want to go through that again."

"No offense taken, Mr. Alexander. Your reluctance is entirely understandable. Fortunately for me, you have no choice in the matter. Miss Misra will show you to the showers. I suggest you take advantage of them. In the mean time my men will remove any sensitive material from your vessel."

"Oh, man, you're going to tear the ship apart? Can't I just go get the stuff for you?"

"Trustworthy though I'm sure you are, I think I would prefer a more thorough search."

"Come on, man. It's a loaner!"

Mr. Patel smiled.

"Your priorities are amusingly out of order, Mr. Alexander," Patel said, leaning forward to tap the pad on his desk again, "Miss Misra, fetch Mr. Hendricks and show Mr. Alexander to a private section of the employee dormitory. Provide him with any reasonable requests, and keep him under surveillance."

He stood and extended a hand to Lex, who stood as well.

"A pleasure meeting you again, Mr. Alexander. I do hope I can come to an arrangement with VectorCorp. I feel that, with a bit of instruction, you could be a valuable part of my organization."

"… I have no idea what to say to you," he said, shaking hands.

A moment later, the door opened and Hendricks and Miss Misra entered.

"This way, Mr. Alexander," she said primly.

The trio proceeded down the hall, Miss Misra leading the way and Hendricks following like an incredibly hostile shadow. It turned out that the confusing network of hallways had evidently been thanks entirely to the trip to the "waiting" room, as the office was right down the hall from the receptionist's desk.

"I trust your meeting went well," she remarked.

"Oh, yeah. It went great. Evidently I have the choice of indentured servitude or death," Lex replied.

"Well, at least you get a choice."

"Too bad I'm not the one who gets to make it. Your Uncle isn't exactly a teddy bear."

"One does not achieve his status through sentimentality and leniency."

"You seem to think very highly of him."

"As well I should. Operlo is the dross of the galaxy, Mr. Alexander. We are under no delusions to the contrary. Mr. Patel was born and bred here, and he has through his own skill and determination managed to attain no small level of success and influence, on the planet as well as off. He did so not through being a brute, as so many in his line of work have, but through cleverness and perspicacity. His methods may not be the most scrupulous, but he managed to wrestle power from men far worse, and his business dealings, legitimate and otherwise, are the only reason this planet hasn't collapsed into total chaos and financial ruin. Since he ascended to power, this planet has become more than what it was, and though I cannot speak in specifics, the impending completion of Gemini will bring us to new heights."

"Okay then..." he replied when the unexpected testimonial came to an end, "I'll tell you this. There must be a killer school around here, because you two have got one hell of a vocabulary. Or two hells of vocabularies. Whatever the appropriate plural is."

The smirk returned to her face and she released a breath that was almost a laugh.

"Nicholas was educated off world, as were my five sisters and I. Thank you, though."

"Five sisters. Wow. Did the whole clan go to the same school?"

"Indeed. Weston University, Tessera V."

"Hey, I was just on Tessera! I jumped off of the roof of the train station into traffic," he said.

"That was you?!" she asked, surprise the first genuine emotion to show even briefly on her face. She squinted at him for a moment. "Good heavens, it WAS you, wasn't it?!"

"Why do you know about that?" he asked warily.

"It was all over the news feed. 'The Jumper at Lon Djinn.' They've been referring to you as an unknown perpetrator. None of the video got a clear shot of your face."

"I was on the news? Kinda cool..." he said, before his common sense cut through the thickening haze of drunkenness, "And very bad. I had a brush with notoriety before. It didn't treat me well."

"Notoriety seldom does."

"Wait... how could they have missed my face? There are cameras everywhere! I jumped into traffic, there are probably shots of me on the stoplight feeds from three intersections."

“Likely VectorCorp is suppressing media coverage,” she suggested.

“Why would they do that?”

“The State of the Company press conference is next week. Any perceived weakness shown so near to the event would be disastrous for the stock prices. You could probably kill the CEO’s son and the news wouldn’t find out until after the closing remarks.”

They finally approached a doorway leading to a tiled hall.

“Here are the showers. What size are you?”

“... What?”

“Clothes. We’ve got uniforms. I can provide you with one.”

“Oh, 1X. For both.”

“You’ll have a fresh outfit waiting on the opposite side of the showers, and the next door on your right will be a sleeping hall. It should be empty. The workers are double shifting.”

“Right. Okay. Thanks.”

He began to shuffle into the shower.

“And Mr. Alexander?” she called from behind him.

“Yeah?”

“I hope that it is indentured servitude, not death.”

“You and me both.”

Chapter 14

The uniform provided was a khaki ensemble, loaded down with pockets and bearing a patch with “TRAINEE” written in bold capital letters. Combined with the wide brimmed hat that accompanied it, wearing it made him feel like the tour guide on a safari ride. He’d had more dignified outfits, but at this point a tutu would have been an improvement over the flight suit, which he was fairly sure was beginning to ferment. The shower and change of clothes, though recuperative, didn’t do much to do away with the alcoholic stupor he’d managed to achieve. Either that rum had more of a kick than he was used to or he really *was* a lightweight. He sat on the edge of a bunk, scratched at his unshaven face, and sorted through the facts.

“Let’s see. I’m on an out-of-the-way planet, being essentially held prisoner by a well educated sociopath, sitting in borrowed clothes on a bunk in an empty dormitory... again. This is a weird little rut my life seems to have gotten into,” he muttered, “But on the plus side, a pretty lady said she’d rather me be a slave than a corpse. I’ve got that going for me.”

“Alexander,” growled Hendricks.

The sudden comment startled Lex’s sluggish mind, causing him to slip off the edge of the bed.

“God! Were you there the whole time? You didn’t watch me shower, did you?”

“Mr. Patel wants you,” he stated, ignoring the question.

“I’ll bet he does. This is something I’m going to have to get used to, isn’t it? On call, 24-7.

“On Operlo it is 35-9. Get moving.”

“You use a different number of days in the week?” Lex said, bundling up his belongings and tucking them under his arm, “Now you’re just being contrary.”

“Move!”

“Okay, okay!”

Hendricks quickly ushered him out of the complex and into the harsh sun, where the silly looking hat suddenly became well appreciated. It may not have been fashionable, but it certainly kept the burning rays off of his face. He was brought to a slightly better cared for hover cart and driven to his borrowed ship, which was surrounded by a small work crew bearing hefty looking tools and irritated expressions. Nicholas Patel was among them. He wore a similar hat and a pair of sunglasses, as well as a glossy black gadget that wrapped around the back of his neck like a collar. Miss Misra was standing beside him and was similarly equipped. They, notably, were the only ones who weren’t sweating in the baking heat.

“Mr. Alexander!” Patel said brightly.

“You called? And what’s with the fancy neck gear?”

“A blood conditioner. Chills the blood passing through the carotid artery,

as I understand it. Quite effective at combating the heat."

"Man. Rich people get all of the best toys."

"Rich people get all of the best everything, Mr. Alexander. It is the primary motivator for becoming rich. And speaking of toys, I tip my hat to you, sir. You've got an excellent security system in place," he remarked.

"Do I?"

"Indeed. My men here tried all of the usual methods to pop the cockpit, and received repeated warnings about... What was the wording, Preethy?"

"Utilization by individuals with level 2 access or lower is not permitted," she supplied, after a glimpse at her datapad.

"When they shifted to more direct methods of access, the ship powered up, electrified the hull, and warned of self destruction."

"It is also attempting to establish a secure communications link," his assistant added.

"Wow. High class stuff."

"Very much so. Would you kindly deactivate it?"

"No."

The generally pleased and jovial expression that seemed to be a staple of Patel's face hardened slightly.

"Mr. Hendricks, please motivate him."

Behind him, he heard the chunky mechanical sound of a good old fashion slug thrower chambering a round. Say what you will about the flashy new microwave, laser, and plasma based firearms, you just can't beat a hand-cannon for intimidation potential. He glanced aside to see a weapon pointed at his ear that, if fired at this range, would probably leave him with more hole than head.

"Look, it isn't a motivation issue. I just can't! I told you, this thing is a loaner. I didn't even know I HAD a security system, so I sure as hell don't know how to turn it off!" Lex quickly assured.

"Well, now would be an excellent time to learn."

After a second glance at the gun, Lex reluctantly stepped toward the ship. The other workers had given it a fairly wide berth, and were watching him with interest as he approached. Aside from the engines humming and all of the system lights lit in the cockpit, there didn't seem to be anything specific wrong. When he was close enough to touch it, he turned again. The workers were watching with morbid interest, no doubt waiting for him to take a heart-topping jolt.

"Uh... ship? DAR? … Ma?" he said, hoping that there might be voice control that he'd been unaware of. Usually that only worked from the inside, but there was a first time for everything.

There was no reaction, save from the workers, who snickered amongst themselves. He gingerly reached out toward the ship, squinting his eyes and turning his head away. Finally his fingers touched the surface. They almost sizzled from the sun-broiled metal, but there was no bolt of lightning or other

excitement. After breathing a sigh of relief, he climbed up onto the recessed steps and tapped the control for the cockpit, which opened.

"I guess it's okay now," he called over his shoulder.

"Right, get to work, boys," Hendricks ordered.

A worker with a lit cutting torch stepped toward the ship. When he came within a meter of the ship, the cockpit suddenly snapped shut.

"Unauthorized personnel within minimum proximity. Please clear the hull and standby for electrical defense activation," warned the external address system, speaking in what appeared to be one of Ma's many voices. Evidently this was one of the donor systems for her vocal interface.

"Whoa, hey okay, back off!" Lex shouted, dropping to the scalding hot ground and covering his head.

When the worker moved away, the ship chirped and proclaimed, "Proximity clear, defense disengaged."

"I am losing my patience, Mr. Alexander," Patel said sternly.

"Okay, everyone stay back, and I'll get in and try to turn it off," Lex said.

"And what is to keep you from simply escaping at that point?" asked Patel.

"Well, the mooring cables, for one," he suggested.

This did not seem to satisfy his host.

"Fine, I won't get in. I'll just reach in. That way Mr. Trigger-Happy over there can shoot me in the ass if I try something."

"… Do it," Patel said warily.

Lex climbed up, popped the cockpit, and reached inside. Stretching as far as he could, he managed to reach the command button on the console.

"Voice interface activated," the ship stated.

"Computer, deactivate security system."

"Modifying safety and security settings requires level 0 access. You have level 1 access."

"Um... grant access to these other guys."

"Increasing access list requires level 0 access. You have level 1 access."

"Anyone have any ideas?" Lex called over his shoulder.

"Stop toying with me, Mr. Alexander," Patel growled.

"I'm not toying with you! This isn't my ship! How many different ways do I have to say it!? Look, I'll just grab the case and hand it over, and then you guys can blow the stupid ship up, for all I care."

"… Very well," Patel said.

"Move slow, Alexander. I've got your balls in my crosshairs," Hendricks warned.

"I assure you, I wouldn't dare do something that would endanger my groinal region."

Slowly, Lex bent over the edge of the cockpit. The case was under the seat, and reaching it from the outside was going to be tricky. His fingers had just brushed against the handle when a blinking red light on the console

suddenly turned green.

"Secure link established," the ship proclaimed.

"I swear to God I didn't do that!" Lex squeaked, crossing his legs.

"Finally!" came a voice over the ship's com system. It was Karter. "What are you trying to do, steal my ship? Control override."

Instantly the ship lurched upward, taking Lex with it. He scrambled for a grip, sending his wadded up flight suit tumbling inside. A bullet ricocheted off of the hull an eighth of an inch from his thigh. A moment later, the ship reached the ends of the mooring lines, coming to a complete stop. Lex was not so lucky. He continued under his own momentum until his back collided with the open cockpit hatch. He bounced painfully off and landed fully in the cockpit. Hendricks' gun barked a few more times, joined a moment later by a few more in the fully automatic range.

"I told you it would take seventy-two hours. That means you come and get your old ship in seventy-two hours! No more gallivanting, I'm bringing that bird home. Automatic Pilot: Engage. Manual Control: Lock Out. Destination Select: Home. Activate."

The engines groaned and strained against the mooring lines as bullets continued to pepper the belly of the ship, now joined by some of the more colorful energy weapons. With a clank, the cockpit hatch locked shut again. Finally the engines flared and the mooring lines snapped, sending the DAR launching into the sky. It was out of the atmosphere and well on its way to FTL speed before Lex managed to climb into the seat.

Behind him on the ground. Hendricks was screaming profanities at the men while Patel shook his head, grin back on his face.

"You know something. I cannot decide whether that man is an absolute genius or the luckiest idiot I've ever seen," he said.

"I'll track him down and get him back here in two hours, Mr. Patel," Hendricks assured.

"Don't bother. Is it active, Preethy?"

"It is, sir," she replied after consulting her datapad.

"Then we shall deal with this later. Back to work, all. We've got a schedule to keep."

Chapter 15

The DAR carrying Lex settled down in the hangar just under a day later. It would have taken Lex considerably longer if he'd had control of the ship. This is chiefly because Lex has petty human concerns like survival. The course traveled by the ship was nearly a straight line, which passed through no fewer than six heavily patrolled regions of space, directly through the center of a debris strewn nebula, and deep enough into the corona of a red giant to risk all sorts of nasty consequences at superluminal speeds. Somehow, though, he arrived in one piece, though the waste disposal system of the pilot's chair got quite a workout.

He peeled himself out of the seat and crawled shakily to the catwalk of Karter's hangar building when the cockpit finally opened. He hadn't even bothered to change out of the construction uniform during the trip.

"Welcome back, Mr. Alexander. The bus is waiting for you outside to take you to Karter's lab," said the helpful voice of the computer.

"Yeah... I'm... just going to sit down here for a minute," he said, slowly collapsing to the catwalk.

"Is there something wrong?"

"… Yeah. Yeah, there is something wrong. Were you in on that little jaunt through space he sent me on just now? Did you know what he had in mind?"

"Yes."

"And you were okay with it?"

"Your survival odds ranged from ninety-two to ninety-eight percent, based upon known factors. Intervention did not appear necessary."

"You were okay with ninety-two?"

"The mean was ninety-six point eight five percent. My default safety threshold is ninety-five percent."

"Maybe next time aim for ninety-nine."

"The survivability of your departure through the reduced exit window was only eighty-four percent. Perhaps your perceived helplessness due to the lock out of manual controls sensitized you to the risks involved for the return trip."

Lex stared blankly for a moment.

"Did he program you to psychoanalyze people, or was that your idea?"

"Careful analysis of intention, motivation, and mental disposition has become an indispensable skill when monitoring and reacting to Karter."

"Yeah, I guess it would."

A moment passed.

"Was your trip successful?"

"Well, it was very productive. I've still got the package, but now I'm pretty sure I pissed off the mob."

"That is an undesirable outcome."

"That's one way to put it."

A few more moments passed.

"Please gather your personal possessions from the vessel. The bus is waiting for you outside to-"

"JUST GIVE ME A MINUTE!" he snapped, shutting his eyes tight and cupping his forehead.

"You are showing strong indicators of stress. Would you like to talk about it?"

Lex sighed and climbed to his feet, beginning to fetch his things from the ship.

"I'm screwed, Ma. I'm screwed, and I have no idea what to do. The biggest company in the universe wants me dead, and they are working both sides of the law to do it. I don't have anyone to turn to. There ISN'T anyone to turn to! And I don't even know why they're after me! Evidently they think that this big pile of papers has something of huge importance that could do major damage to the company," he said, shaking the battered case, "but I don't know what it is! I don't know if there's a way out of this one, Ma. I can't even turn on my slidepad and call for help, because the second I do, they'll be all over me, and probably whoever I called, too."

"You are faced with a number of uncertainties. The human mind is often stressed by the presence of unknowns. One can remove unknowns by increasing data or processing available data," Ma said, "Figuring out what the contents of the case represent could alleviate some of your stress and present new options."

"Yeah, I know. That's what this whole trip was about, but I came up with nothing."

"It is impossible to come up with nothing. The passage of time inevitably brings information. You may simply not realize the usefulness of the information that you acquired, or perhaps the sparseness of the information is making connections between facts unclear. It is important to interpret information as a whole."

"These are very 'computer' answers you're giving, Ma," he said.

"'Human' answers have thus far been unfruitful."

"Good point."

"I suggest that you present your dilemma to Karter. When a problem interests him, he often fixates on it to the exclusion of all else until it is solved, and he is quite skilled in problem solving. I am similarly skilled with data indexing and processing."

"... Yeah. What the hell. It isn't like I've got any other options. It can't hurt, right?"

"Actually, Karter was exceedingly displeased with your lack of punctuality regarding the return of his ship. His actions are likely to reflect his displeasure. However, as your pilot privileges are hereby revoked on the Delta Astro-Recon, Type D, you will need to meet with him to attain ownership of your repaired ship if you intend to leave the planet."

"You aren't filling me with confidence, Ma."

"Forewarned is forearmed, Mr. Alexander. To that end, please be aware that the external temperature is negative twenty-five degrees Celsius, and do not forget to prepare yourself for local gravitational intensity."

Lex looked down at his desert gear.

"The next time I embark on a planet hopping jaunt, I'm packing a suitcase."

"That is advisable."

He spent a moment working up the nerve to sprint to the open door of the bus, then repeated the process when he arrived at the lab. Ma lit a path for him that led down a few floors to the Hall of Rejects. There was the distinctive sound of an impact wrench buzzing through the halls like a mechanical duck. The lights were still indicating his location, but it was hardly a challenge to locate him. The inventor was standing in the middle of one of the larger workshops, bolting on the cowling to some sort of turbine.

"Karter?" Lex said.

His host's head snapped toward him, and in a flash he fumbled for a hammer on a nearby work cart and whipped it at Lex's head. The pilot only just managed to pull out of the way.

"What the hell!?" Lex exclaimed, jumping aside as a wrench twirled toward him.

"'What the hell' is right!" Karter jabbed, stalking toward Lex and grabbing a crowbar. "I said seventy-two hours. Seven two. You were supposed to borrow that ship for three earth days and bring it back to get the replacement."

Lex backed away, hands raised in placation. Karter wasn't screaming. He was griping in a manner that, frankly, seemed appropriate for the minor infraction that had been committed. The tone of voice was about two dozen notches of intensity below his actions, which were positively homicidal. It was more than a little unnerving.

"Whoa, hey!" he objected, pulling his head out of range of a few angry swipes, "So I was a little late!"

"A little late? Come ON, Lex. How long was he gone, Ma?"

"Three hundred and fifteen hours."

"That's four and a half times as long as I said!"

"4.375," Ma corrected.

"I was rounding," he groaned, swiping the hook of the crowbar at Lex's leg.

The nimble younger man managed to avoid getting his thigh skewered, but Karter got the hook behind his knee and pulled his leg out from under him, sending him painfully to the floor. With a terrifyingly tranquil look in his eye, he raised the bar.

"Seems to me that you were trying to steal it. You were welching on a deal."

"Mr. Dee, stop that."

"Stay out of this, Ma," he snapped, stomping a boot on Lex's chest to keep him from escaping, knocking the air out of him in the process. "I told him seventy-two hours."

"No, you told ME seventy-two hours. I told him."

"… Still! He should have been back for the exchange on time."

"At no point did you indicate that he was to return your ship within that time frame."

"Well he could have assumed. It was obvious!"

"You cannot murder someone with a pry bar for failing to adequately interpret an unspoken agreement."

"Wanna bet?"

"Mr. Dee, if you murder him, he will not be able to give you notes on the ship you've created for him."

He considered the words for a moment.

"Fine..." he said, like a spoiled child reluctantly marching off to brush his teeth. He reached down and hauled Lex from the ground. "You're lucky she likes you... By the way, why do you like him now, Ma? Didn't you hate him last time?"

"He illustrated that he was willing to treat me with appropriate regard."

"Pff. Suck up. Come on, Lex. I'll show you the ship."

"You," Lex croaked, still gasping for air, "You tried to kill me!"

"I didn't try very hard, you big baby."

"Are you crazy!?"

"Yes, actually! You wanna see the certificate?" Karter replied, a spark of mischief in his voice.

"Uh..."

Karter dug out an old fashioned leather wallet and fished out an ancient and nearly disintegrated piece of paper. It had been folded and refolded so many times it was ready to fall apart at the creases, but the bizarre fellow carefully unfurled it and handed it to his guest. It looked fairly official. The small, plain type of a legal document formed neat little rows of very official language.

"After thorough psychological and neurological examination," Lex read, "it is the considered opinion of the staff of Westmooreland Psychiatric Treatment facility that the patient, Karteroketraskin 'Karter' Dee, is mentally and emotionally unfit for service in the armed forces in any capacity and more so represents a significant danger to himself and others if unsupervised. Due to borderline sociopathic tendencies, clear obsessive behavior, and early symptoms of developing schizophrenia, it is the recommendation of the committee that he be remanded to a suitably equipped and staffed institution for treatment, indefinitely."

"Neat, huh? That's not the real one, of course. I've got it filed with my degrees. It is about time to print out a fresh copy, I guess. Ma! Get on that!

You can keep that one."

"Uh... I sort of thought that 'certifiably insane' was just a phrase."

"Nope, they actually hand them out. Not to the patient of course. That's for the folks in charge of the meds and stuff, but I snagged it on the way out. After all, I earned it. But anyway, ship, this way."

The lunatic was perfectly calm, as though his earlier violence had never occurred.

"You take medication?"

"I did, for a while. I never bothered to refill the prescription after a while. It gave me dry-mouth."

"It also regulated your violent outbursts," Ma pointed out.

"I fail to see the necessity of regulating violent outbursts."

"It is for that precise reason that you were prescribed the medication," the computer said.

"Nag nag nag. You sound just like Dr. Connors," Karter said, entering the elevator.

Lex hesitated.

"I'll take the stairs," he said.

"Suit yourself. Ma, don't let him get lost," pressing the button and letting the doors close.

When he could no longer hear the elevator, Lex clenched his fists.

"Why didn't you tell me he was a lunatic!?" the freelancer raved, wishing he had a face to address.

"I had warned you that his actions were likely to reflect his displeasure."

"I didn't realize that in this case displeasure was a synonym for homicidal tendencies."

"Reactions such as that are rare. The degree of his displeasure was unanticipated. I think that he was excited about showing off the ship."

"Oh, so he wasn't murderous, he was just feisty."

"I don't appreciate your tone, Mr. Alexander," the computer said sternly, as the lights redirected to the stairwell, "I wasn't the one who tried to kill you."

"A little bit of a warning is all I was looking for. You could have said he was a psychopath. This came out of nowhere."

"He is a wealthy recluse who lives alone on a planet, builds weapons of mass destruction, and crafts living creatures for the purpose of wordplay."

"... Okay. There were signs. I'm sorry," he said, not anxious to get on the computer's 'S-list' again, "It's just that it's been a while since I've dealt with a group of people that didn't have at least one person in it who wanted to kill me."

"I can appreciate how that would raise your stress levels. Would you like a sedative?"

"Thanks but no thanks," he said, pushing open the doors and starting down the stairs. "I dumped about a half gallon of rum down my throat and it

didn't help, so I'm reluctant to turn to pharmaceuticals... Except for that hangover stuff I took on the way over. Whoever invented Sobrietin deserves a medal."

It was a few flights of stairs to the lab's hangar. Lex took his time and tried to mentally delete his host's little 'episode.' The simple fact of the matter was, even if he was a maniac, Karter was certainly the only person with the resources to give Lex a chance at either finding a way out of this mess or at least finding a place to hide. That meant he was going to have to play nice, at least for the time being. He pushed open the door and followed more lights until he came to the little vehicular intensive care unit that had formerly contained his battered ship. Karter was standing, arms crossed, just outside the doorway to the repair bay.

"Took you long enough. You ready for the reveal?" he asked, grabbing the door latch.

"I guess," Lex replied.

"Right, behold!"

He opened the door. What it revealed was remarkable. There was a ship that appeared to be an entirely stock version of the CAII frame that Betsy had been built upon. Without the extra engines inexpertly grafted on, it was a much prettier piece of machinery. The cockpit looked less like a barnacle clinging to the hull of a cluster of engines and more like the control center it should be. Like the DAR, it had the sweeping, smooth lines of an aircraft despite the fact it did almost all of its travel outside of an atmosphere. From above, it would look almost like a squid, minus the tentacles. Flattened fins flared on either side of the cockpit. In the center it bulged around the power plant, which was hooked now to a long, narrow engine bank sporting the twin engines the designers had intended. Along the belly there was a single nub near the nose and one each on either side of the power plant, anti-grav modules that would have been landing gear on an older craft. These nubs had been one of the reasons Lex had always loved the CAII. They let it whip along the ground as nimbly as a hoversled. Various surface details were scattered over the ship, most notably the array of heat dissipation fins along the rear half. Everything about it seemed as though it could have just rolled off of the assembly line, except for the color. Cantrell tended to give the civilian models flashy paint jobs, and the law enforcement models usually were emblazoned with the various logos and warnings of the appropriate department. This one had every square inch painted plain flat black.

"Where did-" Lex began.

"Shh! I'll give you the rundown," Karter shushed, "First off, you'll recall that the design goals were speed and stealth. To that end, I did a ground up rebuild of the entire power and propulsion system. You had six engines on there, but from the pieces I could find, they were pretty lackluster. Surplus, factory seconds, junkyard rejects. The power plant was meaty, but poorly optimized. Now you've got a custom class A reactor and a pair of purpose

built drop in replacements. Something like twice the power output for a little bit less than one third the mass, which boils down an acceleration that beats basically anything on the market. The reduced engine count reduces the surface area, and as a result reduces the heat dissipation, so I threw in a cryo-shunt and a few heat dumpers."

He tapped at a control panel and a section of ship above each engine lifted out of place, extending vast sheets of cooling panels that blossomed outward like a flower.

"The shunt will be able to store a pretty massive amount of waste heat, then when you get a chance you can deploy the heat dumps to shed it off. You should be able to keep her running at, oh, 180% for a good seven hours before risking an emergency shutdown. The matte black paint helps with heat dissipation, too. Plus, it makes you pretty much invisible to visual scanners. Black ship in deep space? Black on black. If you're running at anything under 100%, switching on the cryo-shunts will regulate the emission signature to match background radiation, so you'll be invisible to thermal sensors, too. The whole thing is radio shielded, so EM sensors will have a tough time with you, and I've got a nano-coating on there that will scatter active radar. Basically, in low power mode you can become completely undetectable for pretty much forever. When you are in motion, at 85% you can get about three minutes of undetectability before people directly behind you will start picking up your engines, but even then it'll look more like a sensor blip than a ship."

"Wow. I'm surprised you didn't just put a cloaking device on there," Lex joked.

"Bah. Cloaking devices are useless. Sure, they mask you from all of the usual stuff, but the device itself has a distinctive meson emission pattern that you can follow, and they eat power. Sure most people don't carry meson detectors, but the sort of people who you might actually try to cloak to avoid DO, so they are effectively pointless wastes of power and space. This rig does almost everything almost as well, and it does it all with passives or by dual purposing other modules. Saves power, saves weight. Okay, what else? Oh! I rolled some offensive capabilities in as well."

"But I said-"

"QUIET! Here's the deal. If you set your engine to 98.6%, then double tap the switch for the hull lights, your engine will start belching out wide-band radio noise. That'll jam communications for the area, but it will be indistinguishable from an engine malfunction... because technically it IS an engine malfunction, just one that you can trigger on demand. Also, popping the heat dumpers while you've got that going will give you a rear oriented directional EMP pulse. Double tap the lights again to deactivate. You've got the sensor array from a recon-satellite we got dumped here a few weeks ago. Not top of the line as satellites go, but head and shoulders above anything you'll find on a ship, civilian OR military. I routed some extra juice to your tractor beam, so you should have a lot more grip strength and range, and

holding down the release button while flipping on auto-locking will bring up an offensive mode that will let you pump out shearing pulses with the approximate destructive power of a middle of the road disruptor cannon. Wrapping the whole thing up is a military grade deflection shield system and reinforced plating made from alternating laminate mono-crystal titanium with interspersed carbon polymer sheeting. Here are the benchmarks."

Karter handed a printout showcasing the results of a suite of tests. Normally, he'd be fascinated by the data. Vehicle performance was sort of "his thing." The litany of technobabble had gotten a little difficult to follow toward the end, though, so he was a bit distracted trying to figure out precisely what some of it meant.

"I said no weapons," he said.

"I didn't ADD any weapons. I just gave you the ability to use standard civilian equipment AS weapons. There isn't a single piece of hardware that is illegal or overtly offensive. They'd have to do a full hardware AND software scan, AND beat my encryption, AND run simulations to even suspect you of naughtiness. So calm down. On the other hand, I left in all of the stock weapon mount points, so if you decide to quit being such a pansy and give this thing some teeth, your options are wide open."

Lex shook his head and looked over the numbers.

"This is... this is very impressive."

"Yes, it is."

"And this is just mine? No strings attached?"

"I retain duplication rights to the design, but this particular ship is yours. That was the deal. And unlike SOME people, I honor my agreements. Now name it, get into it, and get out of here."

"I can't."

"Oh, but you can. And you will. I'm done with you."

"No, I can't name it until I've flown it for a while. I don't know what sort of character it has."

"Fair enough. Get into, get out of here, THEN name it."

"But... I have something here that might interest you," he said, holding up the case.

Karter immediately snatched it and forced it open.

"A pile of papers. How very interesting," he said flatly.

"Well LOOK at them at least."

The unstable inventor grabbed a handful of the pages and let the briefcase fall to the ground, spilling the rest. As Lex scrambled to gather them up again, Karter leafed through.

"Stellar mass, average temperature... Support struts, signal filtering modules... What exactly is supposed to interest me about all of this?"

"I don't know, but it must be good, because that is the reason I got shot down here in the first place. Something in those pages has got VectorCorp trying to kill me, and it was enough to get the MOB shooting at me yesterday

right before I came here."

"The mob."

"Yes."

"As in organized criminals."

"Yes."

"And they were shooting at you."

"Yes!"

"While you were escaping."

"YES!"

"In MY ship."

Lex froze.

"… Maybe?" he said, holding up the case defensively.

"Follow me," Karter growled, turning quickly toward the door and marching out.

"You aren't going to try to kill me again, are you?"

"No."

After a moment of thought, Lex slowly stepped out after him, adding, "You aren't going to SUCCEED in killing me, are you?"

"The ship came back in once piece, right?"

"Yes! Yes it did!"

"Then I won't kill you. I might shove my boot up your ass, though, depending on how torn up the ship is. MA! Run a diagnostic on the DAR and have it ready when we get there. And let Solby out. Time for walkies."

Lex followed his host down the hall and, reluctantly, stepped onto the elevator with him. The two stood in tense silence as it trundled up a few floors. The doors slid open, the cute little genetic experiment scampered on, and they continued on to the top floor. When the doors opened, there was one of the mobile mechanical arms waiting.

"Ship diagnostic initiated, scan commencing," Ma alerted, "While you wait, I can scan and index the contents of the case."

The arm extended, opening the gripper.

"Don't waste your time, once this diagnostic is done and I'm done, Lex will be getting the hell off of my planet and never coming back... Except potentially to give feedback on that reactor... and the control systems... Basically I'm going to need feedback on everything."

"Indexing the information will streamline the analysis, should you choose to pursue it, and will utilize otherwise idle processor cycles and peripherals in the interim. It is a waste of time NOT to perform this task at this time," Ma said.

"Fine, whatever," grunted Karter.

"Thank you!" Lex mouthed silently as he handed over the case.

Solby launched onto Lex's shoulder as he followed Karter out onto the planet's surface. When they boarded the waiting bus, his host eyed him sternly while the black and white fuzzball gnawed on his earlobe, licked

inside his ear, and otherwise made an adorable nuisance of himself.

"The computer likes you AND the funk likes you."

"What can I say, I'm a charming guy."

"Either that or my creations all have terrible judgment," Karter countered, patting his lap to send the little creature launching from Lex's shoulder.

When they arrived at the hangar, Lex hurried out of the cold while Karter took his time and Solby sprang about at random. When the funk continued to leap and frolic without any signs of stopping, Karter marched inside.

"Let him in when he's done, Ma," he instructed.

"Yes, Mr. Dee. The diagnostic is complete," she answered.

"Put the results on the screen," he said as he approached the display bay with the DAR docked inside.

Lex stayed at a cautious distance as Karter read the findings out loud.

"All systems nominal. Minor cosmetic damage to lower fuselage from small arms fire, minor stress deformation on mooring rings. Mooring grapples still attached."

"That last part wasn't my fault. You were the one who made the ship yank them free," Lex defended.

"Excuses, excuses. Okay, fine. Things look good. Ma, perform the necessary repairs."

"There is one anomalous result from the scan," Ma said.

"What is it?" Karter asked roughly, turning toward Lex, who was now standing by the exit, ready to dodge anything that might suddenly be hurled in his direction.

"Please investigate the area seven centimeters below the forward, port side mooring ring."

Karter glanced at the offending spot, then selected a tool from a nearby tray and pried what looked to be a thick metallic puck free. He turned it over in his hands briefly, then approached the display screen and tapped at it for a few moments.

"Hey Lex! You know what this is?"

"Whatever it is, it isn't my fault," Lex answered warily.

"This is a tracking device."

"What?!"

"Yep! Which did you visit last, the mob, or VC?"

"The mob."

"Well the mob has gotten fairly sophisticated, I guess."

"This is bad."

"Meh. I wouldn't worry about it. The ship is fine, so you and I are good. As for these guys?They'll probably find their way here, but the moat will keep them off the surface, and I've got no intention of giving them the coordinates of an entry window, so I'm safe down here. I sincerely doubt they'll be able to blockade the whole planet, so all you'll have to do is wait for a window on the opposite side of the planet, then floor it. In that new ship, and with your skills,

you'll get away just fine. And that's assuming they get here before you leave, which they won't, because you're leaving now."

"But wait, what about the papers?"

"Don't care, let's go."

"But-"

"Approaching vessel detected," Ma interrupted.

"Sophisticated AND speedy. Organized crime has really gotten itself together since the last time I had to deal with it," Karter quipped.

Chapter 16

"I wonder what kind of ships hitmen fly these days." Karter mused aloud, "Ma, bring it up on the display panel when we get a visual."

Lex, for the moment convinced that his unpredictable associate was not an immediate threat to his life, approached the panel. As he did, Karter continued.

"In the old days they used to use converted cargo haulers for everything," he reminisced, "Just lop off the cargo portion and you ended up with these zippy little boxes with power to spare for all sorts of add-ons. Plus, they could sell the stolen cargo. It was actually really efficient. I've always been a big fan of the sort of solutions people come up with when they have limited resources like that. I mean, I used to-"

"Visual established."

The image jumped onto the screen, Lex's eyes widened and his jaw dropped. Karter raised an eyebrow.

"Huh," Karter said, thoughtfully, "Didn't see that one coming."

"Is that what I think it is?" Lex asked.

"Do you think it is a VectorCorp Asteroid Wrecker?"

"Yes."

"Then that's what you think it is."

VectorCorp, it was generally agreed, was too powerful. They controlled virtually all of the communications, and virtually all of the transportation, in the colonized galaxy. Couple this with the fact that their employee count was larger than the population of most individual countries and their annual profits exceeded the combined GDP of many planets, and it became clear that in the not altogether unlikely event that they were to militarize, the resulting war probably wouldn't last very long. Realizing this, a large coalition of governments got together and decided that, if VC wanted transit and transmission rights for their sectors, then they would have to sign an agreement limiting allowable combat vessels to nothing larger or better equipped than an armored personnel carrier or anti-pirate scout ship. At the time, avoiding those sectors would have been financially devastating, so VectorCorp reluctantly agreed.

A few years later, the Asteroid Wrecker was unveiled. Those trade routes, the very same ones for which they'd paid top dollar for transit rights, needed to be kept clear after all. That meant that VC had to be prepared to quickly deal with any rogue piece of space rock that might wander into their vicinity. Thus, they created a vessel with a particle cannon that could bore a hole through a mile and a half of solid iron. Asteroids tend to be found in fields of smaller debris, so to shrug that off, they gave the ship high density ballistic plating and a deflection shield powerful enough to protect a large city. Occasionally the best course of action is to push an asteroid out of the way, so it came equipped with remotely operated, high capacity payload rockets. They

were essentially missiles without a warhead. And naturally, in order to facilitate controlled demolition, they kept a ready stockpile of high yield, directional shape charges. They were essentially warheads without a missile. The removal of an asteroid often required specialized vehicles, so an internal, fortified hangar large enough for a small fleet of one-man vehicles was included in the design. Manning the ship was between two and five hundred VectorCorp employees, each with specialized training in deep space, hazardous environments, and demolitions. Independently, every feature and function of the Asteroid Wrecker was entirely sensible for its stated purpose. Taken as a whole, the vessel was a utility vehicle that could go toe to toe with a warship.

And now there was one approaching.

"Can that make it through the, uh, the moat, or whatever?"

"Oh yeah."

"So what are we going to do!?"

"I'm going to go eat some burritos and make sure Solby took a squirt. You're on your own."

"For God's sake, man! This is my life we're talking about!"

"Hey, you got yourself into this, whatever it is. What am I, your babysitter? Man up and deal with it."

The panic wrapped its fingers around his spine and wouldn't let go. It burned in his stomach and roasted his mind. Get away. That's what he had to do. Every man for himself. Get away and regroup. Get away and hide. Just get away! Karter opened the door and shrugged against the cold, and Lex shoved past him. The gravity dropped to half when he left the building and the cold hit him like a hammer, but adrenaline has a way of pushing aside the little things like potential hypothermia. Instead, it revealed that 1g muscles working on a 0.6g planet gave sprinting a whole new meaning. He covered the short distance between the door and the school bus in two steps, slamming into the door and pulling it open. He was seated in the driver's seat and grasping for the controls before he remembered that there weren't any.

"God damn it!" he screamed.

"Those guys are seriously screwing up my moat," Karter grumbled outside.

Lex turned and leaned out of the bus to see one of the most awe inspiring things he'd ever witnessed. The Asteroid Wrecker was approaching from behind the as yet unvisited third building in the complex. To call the thing a vehicle seemed to fall well short. It was practically a civilization. It looked like an Olympic stadium floating in the sky; a round, armor plated monstrosity. The entire perimeter was a thick tube, branching off at one point like a chopped off letter p. A long notch was cut out of the underside, the currently open hangar bay doors, and spaced regularly along the rim were thrusters. They were built in space, so anti-gravity modules were left out, favoring instead the oversized engines to keep it out of the gravity well of

planets and stars when the time came. Currently the whole vehicle was wreathed in a glittering ring of violet sparkles as its shields were pelted by a constant stream of debris. The very same debris had perforated Lex's beloved Betsy, yet from the looks of it nary a pebble of it was reaching the wrecker.

"Minimal life signs detected," Ma announced over the external loudspeakers of the building.

"What do you mean? They're all dead?" Lex yelled.

"No. It is a primarily automated system. Only one human operator," she clarified.

"Why would they do that?"

"Fewer witnesses," Karter said simply as he boarded the bus, Solby on his usual perch, "Standard operating procedure when you've got wet work to do. Take an automated vehicle, cut the surveillance systems and long range communications, and hand control over to your trigger man. If things go south, you can always claim a glitch caused the AI to go rogue, and there will be no evidence to the contrary."

The bus started up and began to whisk back toward the lab.

"How the hell do you know that?"

"Classified," he said, stroking Solby and leaning back.

"Why are you so calm?"

"Because they're after you, not me."

"Karter, these people killed a whole shuttle of people to take out the person who gave me the package. Do you really think they are going to be precise when they come after me? Clearly they don't care about collateral damage."

Karter stared thoughtfully at Lex for the remainder of the short ride, seemingly considering the statement. It wasn't until the doors hissed open again and the inventor stepped out that he finally spoke, turning to his guest.

"You've got a point, Lex. Fortunately, I've got something which ought to make them open to negotiation."

"Thank God! What?"

"You," he said, shutting the door and tapping a panel on the outside, illuminating a sign reading '*Door Secured.'*

"No. NO!" Lex screamed, banging desperately at the door, "Ma! Don't let him do this!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Alexander. I will do my best to see to it that both of you survive this exchange, but currently this appears to be the only arrangement that gives a reasonable chance of at least one party maintaining life and liberty, and is thus the most ideal course of action," the computer stated.

Above, the wrecker was near enough for the apocalyptic hum of its engines to rattle the windows of the bus. Considering the fact that the ship was still a half mile up, that spoke volumes of the raw power of the vessel. Now that it was out of the debris field, the shields dropped and a ship exited the hangar. It didn't take long for Lex to recognize it, and thus become aware

of just how screwed he was. The smaller ship, looking like a flea falling off of a wooly mammoth, was a DAR, but not just any DAR. It was the same ship that had shot him down two weeks ago. It was Agent Fisk. The vehicle drifted down to a few feet above the ground, its nose just a few yards from the bus and Karter. Solby, intrigued by the new visitor, leaped from his shoulder and began to yip and prance about.

"Attention. You are harboring a known fugitive," echoed the agent's voice from his ship's public address system.

"Harboring my ass! He's right there! I'm not harboring anybody. You, however, are trespassing on my land. So take your fugitive and get out."

"Trevor Alexander was carrying sensitive information."

"If you say so."

"You will be remanded to custody until it can be determined whether you were given said information."

"Nope, sorry. Look, I did your job for you. Your fugitive is locked in that bus. Realistically, I should be asking for some sort of reward, but because I'm a nice guy, I'll let you take him for free, and I won't even press charges for the damages you did to my moat on the way in. But that is the extent of the transaction," Karter said, turning and walking toward the lab entrance.

"Halt, or I will be forced to use force," Fisk warned.

"You're in a ship, moron," Karter said, turning around, "There's nothing you could possibly use on me that wouldn't potentially kill me, and you can't afford to kill me, because you're not sure where the info is or if I've done something with it."

He continued walking toward the lab.

"This is your last warning."

Karter responded with a raised middle finger, not even bothering to turn back to Fisk to deliver it. The mad scientist must have been extremely confident in his interpretation of the facts, because he didn't so much as flinch as a nasty sounding weapon started to charge. He didn't even flinch when it fired into the ground, raining down shattered fragments of stone and spattering the bus with flecks of molten rock. No, it wasn't a sound that stopped Karter. It was a sudden silence.

He turned, his face emotionless and cold. His eyes turned to a crater blasted out by the DAR's plasma cannon. There, at the edge of it, a smoldering tuft of black and white fur drifted slowly to the frosty ground. Karter stood statue still, eyes locked on the clump of hair. His cheek twitched slightly.

"You WILL take me seriously," Fisk growled.

"Ma," Karter uttered, eyes never leaving the patch of fur, "It appears that a rather large piece of junk has made it through the moat. Take care of it."

"Acknowledged," the computer replied.

The agent began to bark another command, and there was the distinct sound of weapons charging, but an instant later both were wiped out by a

network of intense beams of light converging on the ship. Every single roof-mounted laser had targeted him, firing in unison and tracing lines along the hull of the ship, leaving trails of molten metal behind. A force field flicked into existence a moment later, but it only managed to hold off the lasers long enough for the ship to fire up its engines and try to escape. When the shield collapsed, the lasers sliced into one of the engines, sending the ship spiraling off course. It arced up over the roof of the lab and corkscrewed to the ground somewhere behind with a sound of screeching metal.

"Come on," Karter said, disengaging the lock and letting Lex out of the bus.

"Thanks for coming to your senses and doing the right thing," Lex said, shaking his hand.

"Shut up. We've got a job to do."

"What do you mean? You took him out, and there's no one on the wrecker. We're safe, right?"

"Seems to me that Agent Fisk was a pro. If he's anything like me - and judging from the fact he wanted you dead, he's a lot like me – then he would have put a dead man switch on that sucker hanging over our heads in the event he was taken out of commission. Any second now it is going to wake up and do something unpleasant."

"Wait, what's going to hap-"

The rest of the sentence was lost in a rush of sound as the whole of the complex was bathed in red light. The ground shook and a deafening roar split the air as a ring of weapon mounts around the rim of the wrecker decided to show Karter what REAL lasers look like. Beams of coherent light five feet around marched steadily across the landing ground, slowly working toward each other. Rather than succumbing to the moth-like urge to stare into the source of the light, Lex instead ran desperately toward the lab entrance. It slid open and he and Karter rushed inside. The doors stopped halfway, but Karter pulled open an access panel and cranked them shut.

Even with the doors closed the sound was too loud to speak over. The lights in the lab were flickering weakly, emergency indicators over stairwells and exits blinking on. For thirty seconds, both men simply stood and endured the quaking earth. Then, as quickly as it came, the sound and shaking dropped away.

"Ma! Damage report!" Karter ordered, marching down the hallway with purpose.

"Partial collapse in the arm-arm-arm-ory-ry. Primary Power coup-up-uplings severed. Wide-ide-ide spread power fluctuation-tion-tion-tions. Affected Systems: Light-ighting, Environmentals, Gravit-vit-vitation, Securit-rit-rity. Attempting to restore power by re-re-re-re-re-re-...routing through secondary," the computer reported, voice files stuttering at random, "Also, I appear-pear to be malfunct-unct-unctioning-ning. How very distressing. Initiating self-diagnosis-nosis-sis-sis."

“That doesn’t sound good,” Lex said anxiously.

“Data bussssssssss corruption found. Reboot recommended.”

“Not yet, I need you awake for now. That thing is going to shoot at us in about eight minutes,” Karter said, hurrying down the hall.

“You mean shoot at us again, right?” Lex said, keeping pace.

“No, that was just the targeting laser.”

Lex stopped.

“What...”

“It painted a cross hair on the complex. The actual weapon is going to be a little more exciting when it goes off. We should probably try to stop it before then, because we won’t be around afterward.”

“Well... well can’t Ma just shoot it down with the lasers?”

“Those are for pushing debris around and zapping turds. Any half decent shield will shrug them off. If we hadn’t sucker punched Fisk, they probably would have had trouble with him.”

“Approximately half of our lasers have been damaged-aged-aged or destroy-troyed in the targeting las-las-las-las-las-as-as-as-sssssssssss... speech module malfunction, activating alternate speech modules.”

“Yes, fine, we get the point!” Karter snapped.

Suddenly an explosion rocked the building.

“What NOW!” Karter growled.

“Aviones de ataque han sido desplegados,” the computer alerted.

“What?!” Lex moaned.

“Attack drones. Lex, I’m going to need you to get out there and try to deal with them. Aren’t you glad I rigged up some sneaky weaponry on your ship?”

“Me? Get out there? What are you going to be doing?”

“Trying to scrape together a weapon to take out that wrecker before it knocks the planet out of orbit.”

“You mean you have all of this crazy crap and you don’t have any weapons?!”

“I’ve got enough weapons to overthrow a world government, but they are all over in the armory, which is the first thing they went after.”

“So you put ALL of your weapons in the same place!?”

“Knowing what you know about me, do you think it would be wise to have weapons readily available?”

“… No, I guess not.”

“Right, so get down to the hangar, and quit wasting my time!”

Lex ran toward the elevator, but considering the fact the lights had yet to be restored, it seemed like too much of a gamble to trust it. Instead, he threw open the doors to the staircase and bounded down them, skipping as many steps and hopping as many banisters as possible. About half way down, the lights finally stopped flickering.

“Parcial de energía restaurada.”

“I don’t speak Spanish!” Lex exclaimed breathlessly.

“Teilweise Power restauriert.”

“I don’t even know what language that is!”

“Deutsch. Sie sollten sich überlegen Erlernen weiterer Sprachen.”

The monolingual pilot ignored the statement and kicked open the doors to the repair bay, throwing open the hatch and climbing into the cockpit of his repaired ship.

“Öffnung Hangartore kaufen. Viel Glück, Herr Alexander.”

“Whatever you say, Ma.”

The instant Lex was in the seat – which was the same fancy model that had been in the DAR, he would have to thank Karter for that – he felt the panic start to subside. He was still scared out of his mind, but this was a ship. This was HIS ship. It was the one thing he was good at, the one thing that he didn’t have to think about. His fingers found their way to the appropriate switches, powering up systems, adjusting straps. Tweaking, tapping, testing. When the systems were ready, he juiced the throttle.

Karter did good work. The acceleration was astounding, multiples of what old Betsy had. He put some distance between himself and the swarming drones and pulled a hard turn. The ship was as nimble as it was fast. It left his old one in the dust. And yet... Perhaps it was because he’d reused some components, or perhaps it was some engineering mojo that he would never understand, but somehow this ship FELT like Betsy. It was something in the rattle of the engine, in the hum of the electronics. The body of Betsy was dead and gone, but the soul was still kicking.

A moment of thought dredged up the procedure necessary to get his “gun” functional. When he held down the release and flipped on auto-lock, all of the little moving dots on his ship’s sensors were suddenly updated with ranges and estimated hull integrities. He popped a stick of gum in his mouth, wrapped his hands around the controls, and grinned.

“Let’s do this.”

Chapter 17

Lex led his new ship into battle, its new and improved shield kicking on automatically. A quiet voice in his head felt it was necessary to point out that he'd never once been in a dog fight, nor had he done any training. He silenced it. Flying a ship was all about getting it to go where you want to go and do what you want it to do, and he'd always been able to do that. Besides, he'd had to avoid being shot before. The only difference this time was that he could pull a trigger every now and then. A lifetime of video games had gotten him ready for that.

The drones were everywhere. His computer claimed that there were forty, and he was in no mood to count them personally. The things looked less like spacecraft and more like some sort of mechanical insects, thrusters, sensor nodes, and weapons fused into a spindly, gangly mass. As soon as he was nearby, they stopped assaulting the lab and started targeting him. The in-ship safety systems started their usual litany of warnings, but he tuned them out. After a quick glance at the new options present on the tractor beam menu, he quickly selected "Auto Target: Best Target" and "Auto Fire: Enabled" from the appropriate menus and picked a drone.

Despite the substantial upgrade he'd gotten in terms of hardware, the drones were far more agile. It took all of the reaction time and steering nuance he could muster to get behind one, and by the time he did, three more were heaving shots at him from all sides. He kept at it, sweeping close to the buildings to clear away swarms and nudging his ship out of line of fire until finally the modified tractor beam did its thing. The sound was like an angry jackhammer, flipping alternately between attract and repel at a devastating frequency. In a few seconds the shield of the targeted drone suddenly failed, and a moment later the craft literally rattled to pieces.

"Yeah!" he cheered, but his celebration was cut short when a pair of plasma bolts slapped against his shield, knocking it down to 75%. If he was going to survive this, he was going to have to be VERY careful.

A trio of ships swept down in front of him, but he cranked up the speed and twisted the ship's belly toward them. The beefy shield and extra mass of his vehicle tore through them like tissue paper. From above there was a volley of shots, but he angled the ship between them, then opened fire on his opponents, taking one of the ships out and clipping another before having to dodge another salvo from above. Racing and freelancing instincts slowly began to find their niches. Reflexes honed to take advantage of passing opportunities started to adapt to firing opportunities. Skills used to identify safe paths through asteroid clusters found use in zipping through ship attack formations. Everything was falling into place. The question was, would it be enough?

Inside the lab, Karter was moving as quickly as his piecemeal body would

allow, fetching reels of cable, connectors, and jacks.

"Ma, how are we looking on power?" He asked, glancing at a watch.

"Einen Moment," Ma replied.

The lights flickered one last time.

"Volle Kraft wiederhergestellt. Jetzt versucht die Schwerkraft und den Umweltschutz wiederherzustellen."

"Full power, excellent. Skip the gravity and enviromentals for now. Whatever lasers are still working, get them to work helping out Lex. I'm going to need cover in a minute."

"Ja, Herr Dee."

"And work on getting English back online, would you? German makes you sound creepy."

"Säuberung Audio-Puffer. Bitte warten Sie," she said.

There was a sudden, intense screech from the speakers.

"Audio buffalo purgatory completely. Primary language modular restoration."

"Still not quite right, Ma," he said, "Do me a favor and get the big door open."

"Negative. Power fluctuating have causeway security clearance issues."

"Then shut down security for now, I need that door open."

"Are you surefire?"

"Yes, and open all doors and hatches to the roof. And get me an express lift ready to take me there."

"Yes sirius."

Outside, the longer Lex tangled with the drones, the tighter their formations became, and the less room for error he had. He'd only managed to take out ten of them before the shield was taking hits as quickly as it was recharging. The new and improved ship might be faster and more powerful, but it was also a huge target, and the drones were like wasps, packing more of a punch than they had any right to. Without the need for a pilot, they were basically just engines, guns, and shields. That made for a very light, very elusive target. If he didn't make some progress soon, he was going to be left with no options but to make a mad dash and hope he could out run them.

As a cluster of the ships were aligning for an attack, a sequence of laser blasts from the roof scattered them. Sure enough, the lasers weren't enough to do any serious damage, but they managed to cause the drones to prioritize, and in the brief confusion, he shot a handful of them down and darted out through an opening.

"How's the ship holding up?" Karter asked, over the com system.

"Little busy," Lex replied.

"I bet. Listen. In a second, I'm going to be up on the roof. Do me a favor, and don't let anyone shoot me. I'm going to have something volatile, and I'd like to avoid having my face blown off."

“I’ll do my best, but my hands are kind of full.”

“Well your best better be good enough, because we’ve got about a minute twenty, give or take, before that ship lets loose with a shot that could probably cut a moon in half.”

“No pressure or anything.”

“Most office the lasers have been damages, butter I williams do what I cannon to scatter the focus of the drones,” said Ma.

“Okay... thanks,” Lex said, trying to ignore the fact that a malfunctioning AI that couldn’t even speak properly would be firing lasers in his general direction.

A hatch flipped open on the roof, and up rose a forklift with a familiar device balanced precariously on its tines. It was the concoction he’d referred to as the magic mirror, and from the looks of it, he hadn’t been gentle with it during its removal. The ship above had been slowly maneuvering, turning on end and orienting the gaping mouth of its cannon at the surface of the planet. Karter, at the controls of the forklift, eyed it up and angled the hulking device as accurately as he could. He then threw down an old fashioned manual jack under the edge before lowering the rig to the ground.

Drones roared overhead as he crouched and put his mechanical arm to work, jacking up the end of the device until it was roughly pointing at the wrecker. He then pulled out a bundle of cables and ran to the base of a handful of broken roof lasers, hooking up to their power supplies and jacking into the crudely aimed device.

“Okay, step one, deactivate safety devices,” he said, pulling out a hammer and smashing a small control box on the side. “Done. Now, let’s see how dangerous I can make this thing.”

Power started to flow into the device as he flipped switches and turned knobs. The current was enough to make the cables shudder and smolder. Slowly the menacing black dot began to form. Bolts of energy were peppering the roof, but the combined efforts of Lex and Ma managed to draw most of the fire. That was fortunate, since Karter was paying absolutely no mind to the chaos going on around him. His eyes were fixed resolutely on the growing back dot, an unsettling grin on his face. It wasn’t until the ship above started to produce a pulsating thump that he tore his eyes away.

“Let’s see how that shield handles a singularity!” He announced, hammering a button on the controls.

With a crackle of energy, the refrigerator sized hunk of machinery fired the barely visible speck of black. The force of the recoil drove the rest of the machine halfway into the roof like a tent peg and launched the forklift off the edge of the roof. Almost immediately the tiny dot was invisible, but Karter closed his natural eye and focused his electronic one, tracking the trajectory.

“Come on, come on!” Karter growled, “How’s containment, Ma?”

“Containment holding. Guidance fieldglass holding.”

The super-dense projectile shuddered through the air under the influence of the machine's fields, growing slightly as it went. When it struck the shield, it passed through without slowing, the marble-sized collision managing to light up and collapse half of the deflector array. The armor plating wasn't much of a match for it either, a perfectly circular bite being taken out of it as the singularity passed through like a stone tossed into a pond. Presumably it continued to pass through the various systems and mechanisms of the Asteroid wrecker unimpeded until it struck the tube of the main weapon.

"Disabling containment!" Karter announced, reaching down and yanking a cord.

There was a brief flash, then a clap as the black hole collapsed, unleashing a wave of energy that tore easily through the weapon, rupturing it and sending a string of explosions running through the hull.

"Yes! YES!" Karter said, slapping the machine, "Oh, I am SO making a black hole mortar now."

"Did you do it!?" Lex asked, his voice transmitting out of a communicator in Lex's arm.

"Hell yeah I did!"

"Then why are all of these drones still trying to kill us!?"

Karter looked up, seeming to notice for the first time that twenty or so robotic fighters were continuing to swarm and bombard the area.

"Good question. Ma, how's the wrecker look?"

"41% hull integral. Running on secondary powerhouse. I am detecting missile modular activation."

Karter growled.

"Fine. They want to play it that way? I'm fresh out of black holes, but they're fresh out of shields," he said, kicking the ring from the front of the hopelessly lodged magic mirror, revealing the four particle beams, "So these suckers ought to make a dent."

He leaned down and threw a switch on the mercifully still accessible, and still functional, control panel. All four massive weapons fired, producing a continuous beam that struck the wrecker viciously. After a few seconds, the beams burst out the other side of the ship, armor plating running like melted wax. There was no way to aim, but he didn't have to. The automated ship was attempting to get out of the way of the beam, and in doing so only managed to drag its trail of destruction across the surface.

"Caution, particular beam heathen levels approaching danger threshold."

"Just a little bit longer," Karter said, mesmerized by the beam's effect.

After a few seconds, the path of the beam crossed the main power for one of the engines, causing it to sputter and fail. The whole ship pitched to the side and rotated, allowing the beam to trace a neat spiral across its surface before two more engines gave out. The monster finally dropped out of the sky, missing the half collapsed armory by barely a hundred meters and shaking the entire complex with earthquake force.

“That’s what you get! THAT’S WHAT YOU GET!” Karter crowed, stabbing his finger viciously at the downed vehicle.

“Heathen levels criticism!”

“Oh, right!” he said, kicking the switch open and shutting down the beams.

Without the main computer to guide them, the drones suddenly lacked the organization they’d shown before. They worked well when guided, and were capable of organizing themselves autonomously, but the transition from one to the other evidently involved an awful lot of aimless milling about, which made for easy targets. By the time they’d gotten back into an effective formation, there weren’t nearly enough to put up much of a struggle.

Chapter 18

Lex pulled into the Lab hangar and landed the ship. Once he stepped out, he walked a wide circle around it. Despite the extended dog fight, some combination of his reflexes and the no doubt overpowered shield Karter had installed had kept his ship almost perfectly untouched. An embarrassingly large chunk of his mind had been preoccupied with keeping his ship safe not because he was inside of it and he would probably die if he didn't, but because he JUST got it fixed and it looked GORGEOUS.

"Not a scratch on it..." he said, in disbelief.

"Excellence flightiness, Mr. Alexander," Ma said.

"Nice shooting, Ma!" he exclaimed, "That was nuts out there! And we did it! Oh, man, if you had a body, I would kiss you right on the lips!"

"I appreciate the sentimentality," she said.

"Where is Karter? I need to high five someone before my head explodes!"

"Mr. Dee is attempting to access a lowered level Labrador in accessibility section five to restoration an importance component to functionality. Many doorways and lifts are malfunctioning. I will lead you to him shortly. I mustard reboot systems affected byway the data corruption, including myself."

"You gonna be okay?"

"Yes. Do note worries. I william be back to fully functionality in six minutes. Systems will become coming backward online in orders of priorities. I am lasting."

"… Okay. I'll talk to you then."

There was a crackle and beep on the loudspeaker as Ma finally dropped away to straighten herself out. Lex, with nothing else to do, decided it would be nice to get some food in his stomach. It shouldn't be too difficult to find that cafeteria. He'd been there before. As he headed off toward the stairs, he thought he heard a door shut at the other end of the hangar.

"Karter? That you?" he asked.

The only reply was his echo. Lex shrugged and pushed open the door to the stairwell.

Karter was several floors down, heading further. The facilities were dug deep into the planet, more than twice as deep underground as they were tall above it. Some shafts and vaults ran much, much further. The more important, more fragile things tended to be found in these areas in order to protect them from surface threats. After the collapse of the Asteroid Wrecker, half of the elevators were out of operation, and power was spotty, so the inventor was reduced to using the stairs.

"Stairs," he muttered to himself, "What am I, a caveman? This is f-"

He was interrupted by a siren and spinning red warning light.

"Ma! What's that all about?" he complained.

There was no reply.

"Oh, right. The reboot. Security came up pretty quick."

He entered some commands into an unseen control panel evidently installed on his false arm and brought up a Heads Up Display in his eye. It listed the status of various systems, then printed an alert.

"Intruder alert. That's probably Lex. Pain in the... two intruders?"

He began to cycle through available cameras. He quickly found Lex milling about in the upper levels, evidently having trouble finding his way through the building. None of the other cameras seemed to be turning up anything. Quite a few of the them were nonfunctional after the attack... but there were seven nonfunctional cameras in a row along an access corridor right above him. And now there were eight. He switched quickly to the next in the sequence and caught a distant view of a man in military dress raising a gun and firing it before that camera blacked out too.

"Damn it!" Karter growled, hurrying down the stairs.

He quickly issued the commands to lock down all of the doors between himself and the intruder, then opened a com channel.

"Lex!" he barked.

"Karter? Hey, great job on the-" the pilot began, his voice echoing over the microphone of the intercom.

"Shut up! I think your friend didn't die in his crash, and he's coming this way. Get your ass down here and help me."

"Fisk isn't dead?! Where are you?"

"Access Section Five. It's on the north side of-"

There was a blast overhead as Fisk blew open the door to the stairwell. Before Karter could give any more direction, the Agent leaned over the railing and opened fire down the shaft. From the sound of it, it was a plasma rifle. Military issue, firing the vicious little beast looked and sounded like a rapid fire roman candle, a dotted stream of orange bolts hissing through the air and turning bits of catwalk into slag. Karter wisely decided that any further energy should be dedicated to getting himself as far from that weapon as possible.

Unfortunately, unlike Lex, Karter wasn't exactly in peak condition. His slight gut aside, most of his artificial parts weighed more than their natural counterparts, and he had an awful lot of them. As he labored down the stairs, his pursuer was closing fast.

"Stop!" Fisk ordered, firing a burst of shots ahead of Karter in an attempt to cut him off.

"How the hell much are they paying you that you are still after me after I blew your ass up!?" Karter huffed, fighting with a door that was stubbornly refusing to open.

"I'm a soldier. Soldiers finish their missions."

"You work for VectorCorp. You're a rent-a-cop for a parcel service."

"Hands where I can see them!" He ordered, stopping at the landing opposite the door Karter couldn't get open, maintaining the higher ground and

keeping his target in his sights.

Cornered, Karter raised his hands, turning to face the soldier. Distantly, there was a rumble as the air conditioning finished reinitializing.

"So you are the infamous Dr. Dee. Funny, until recently I thought it was an initial," he said.

"You've heard of me, huh?"

"Of course. When Alexander ended up at this exact location a second time after acquiring the data, I did some research before pursuing. You covered your tracks well, but we eventually found the connection. Karteroketraskin "Karter" Dee. Former military contractor, current independent contractor. Research and Development. Weapons specialist."

"Idiots specialize. I'm a generalist."

"Alexander came here to sell you the information. You are going to show me where you are keeping the data, what you've discovered, and what you were planning to do with it. If you found some way to transport the original data or a duplicate without our knowledge, you will give us the names of the other parties who may have it. If and when you cooperate, we'll see where we go from there."

"I didn't do anything with your data because, up until you showed up, I didn't care about it. But now that you've stormed my castle and murdered my pet to get it back, you can be damn sure that once I'm done killing you, I'm going to take a good long look, just to spite you."

Agent Fisk shifted the weapon's aim and fired, striking Karter's mechanical arm just below the shoulder. There was a spray of sparks and it fell limply to his side.

"OW! The pain circuits were still on, asshole!"

"The records we've got on you list your other arm as intact. You open your mouth one more time to do anything but cooperate, and you'll be looking for another replacement."

Karter stood silently, measuring Fisk with his gaze. The only sound was the occasional hiss and sputter of his damaged arm.

"Well? What are you waiting for?" the Agent growled.

"This."

At that moment, the gravity finished reinitializing, nearly doubling the weak gravity of the planet to artificial earth-level gravity in a moment. The instantaneous, unexpected increase brought Agent Fisk's gun down heavily on the guard rail as his unprepared arms had to deal with its full weight. The weapon bounced free of his grasp and plummeted down the shaft of the stairwell. Karter, who had been watching the countdown to full gravity on his HUD, was prepared, and took advantage of the moment of confusion to give the door a few motivating kicks. Finally it opened and he sprinted down the hall. Fisk followed, drawing a survival knife from his belt.

Karter ducked into a side room, Fisk close on his heels. The door to the room barely shut in time to keep the security agent out. The room was dimly

lit, and nearly empty. The only distinguishing features were a control console built into the angled top of a work surface on the far end, and countless tiny hatches, perhaps two feet square, completely covering the walls in a grid, like post office boxes. As Fisk began hammering on the door, Karter went to work at the console.

Outside, the agent stepped back and withdrew a black hemispherical object from the pouch on his belt. He affixed it to the door, took a few steps down the hall, and pressed a key sequence on a control pad strapped to his forearm. There was a short, sharp rush of power as the breaching charge detonated, neatly forcing the door from its mounting. It fell aside and Fisk cautiously approached the cleared entrance. Karter rushed from inside in a mad blitz, tackling Fisk to the ground. His mechanical arm was entirely missing, but the inventor managed to land three good punches with his remaining arm before his enemy gained control, grabbing him by the shirt and throwing him aside.

In a heartbeat, Agent Fisk was on his feet. He hammered Karter across the bridge of his nose with the butt of his knife, then followed up with two more blows to the side of the face before hoisting him from the ground and heaving him back into the room. The inventor slid to a stop, his head bashing painfully into the base of the console.

"That's enough, Dee. You are out of options, and you have no place to run. Either you do as I say, or you die and I get a team of men to tear this place apart until I find what I'm after."

"Oh..." Karter said, spitting a mouthful of blood, "Something's getting torn up, alright."

Agent Fisk tightened his grip on his knife and stepped forward, but hesitated. There was a tapping noise from the console. He looked up to see the disembodied mechanical arm pressing buttons on the control panel.

"Whatever you are doing, stop immediately, or you die right now!" he ordered.

Karter smiled a bloody grin as a tone sounded and a red light lit above one of the hatches. It slowly slid open. Agent Fisk backed cautiously away, knife held ready. In a blur of motion in the dim light, a furry form dropped out and landed on the ground. It shook itself, black and white fur ruffling to full fluffiness, and surveyed its surroundings. It was another funk. The beast looked to the battered form of Karter, then to the Agent. Lips peeled back in a snarl, revealing tiny teeth, and a high pitched growl buzzed in its chest. Fisk relaxed slightly.

"You are really going to make me kill another one of these?" he said, almost in disgust.

He raised a boot to stomp the creature, but before he could make another motion, it sprang from the ground to his shoulder, then climbed to the top of his head, squatting over his face and raising its tail. Before he could react, the little creature released a spray of the most intensely foul smelling substance

Fisk had ever encountered. It didn't seem to be toxic or caustic, but the stench was literally disorienting, and whatever the stuff was, it burned his eyes. With a savage growl he tore the tiny beast from his head and hurled it across the room, prompting a pathetic yelp.

"I will make you EAT that little monster," Fisk raged, coughing and trying to wipe the wretched stuff from his face, "I will shove it down your..."

His vision had yet to clear, but something made him pause his threat. There was a sound. First once, then again, then again and again there came a tone, followed by the soft tap of petite clawed feet and a chorus of the same high pitched growl. One by one, each of the hatches slid open and an identical creature hopped out.

"Sic 'em, boys," Karter wheezed.

Tails were lifted, teeth were bared, and Fisk was buried in dozens of glorified stuffed animals. Soon the air was choked with their spray, a legion of genetic hybrids sinking their teeth into their target.

Outside, Lex was rushing down the stairs, heading for the doorway marred by plasma burns. As he got closer, the stench got progressively thicker. He covered his mouth with the cloth of his borrowed clothes and pressed on. When he reached the landing, the beaten form of Karter stumbled out of the hallway and into the comparatively fresh air of the stairwell.

"Karter, are you okay?" Lex coughed, "My god, what happened to you?"

"What took you so long?" he growled, punching Lex's arm.

"All you said was 'Access Section Five.' It isn't like there's a mall directory. Are you okay?"

"Heh, better than the other guy. Hang on. Decontaminating," he said, his final words delivered with the distant, distracted expression he tended to wear when controlling his arm from a distance.

A moment later exhaust fans kicked on, clearing the air of most of the residual spray, rendering the hallway just barely breathable. What looked like sprinkler heads dropped from recesses in the ceiling and spritzed a mist of an antiseptic smelling chemical. Whatever it was, in less than a minute the stuff had completely eliminated the stink.

"Come on. Let's see the damage," he said, pacing back inside.

Lex followed to find the most bizarre and disturbing sight he'd seen in his life. At least two dozen funks, ranging in size from barely a puppy to the smallish dog size that Solby had been, were milling around, investigating each other, and shaking off the chemical from the nozzles. At the sight of Karter and Lex at the door, they entered a frenzy of affection, yipping and prancing about and trying to claim their perch on each man's shoulders.

"Easy guys, easy. Get down, line up," he said.

Reluctantly, the furry little beasts gathered along the walls, sitting obediently and fidgeting with excitement.

"What's all this?" Lex asked, confounded.

"This is Solby," Karter said.

"Last I checked, Solby was one creature. Singular. And for that matter, past tense."

"Redundancies, backups, and replacements for all vital systems. That's just good engineering practice," Karter explained, scanning the row of creatures.

"And what the hell happened to him!?" Lex asked, suddenly noticing what was left of Agent Fisk.

He looked as though his skin had been worked over with a cheese grater, and judging by the rather sizable sections of his anatomy that were rendered unrecognizable, checking for a pulse would be a waste of time. Evidently even tiny, adorable teeth can take out a full grown man, if there are enough of them, and he can barely see or breathe.

"Well, he killed Solby, so Solby ganged up and killed him. I don't know if getting mauled to death by an army of itty bitty, stench spraying cuties is irony or karma, but it sure is hilarious. A pain in the ass, though, since now all the little guys are covered in blood. Oh well, I'll just up the kennel cleaning cycle for the next couple of days," he said with a shrug, "Ah, there you are."

He leaned down and plucked the largest of the assembly of funks.

"So you just keep a pack of funks around, in the event one of them dies?"

"First of all, the collective noun for funks is a parliament, not a pack. And second, no, this isn't just a parliament of funks. These are all Solby. I keep daily full backups of his memories and I do incrementals every five seconds. That's what the little gadget on his neck is for. High bandwidth wireless transceiver jacked into his nervous system for uploading and downloading the contents of his brain. Those guys all have the precise mind that Solby had when he woke up this morning, and the big guy here remembers everything up until a few seconds before he died. Saves me the trouble of training him over again," he explained, turning to the others, "Okay, boys. Everyone back to bed."

The little creatures eagerly scampered back to the nearest hatch. Once inside, each hatch closed and the red light flicked off. One of them, the smallest puppy-sized creature, hopped uselessly at one of the higher level ones until Lex wandered over and helped him inside. Finally, only the "official" Solby remained.

"Okay, so now-" Karter began.

He was interrupted by a three note chime, followed by a familiar voice.

"Altruistic Artificial Intelligence Control System, Version 1.27, revision 2331.04.01, Designation 'Ma,' fully active. Please standby while I review sensor logs of recent downtime. Processing... Processing... Processing... … I leave you two alone for six minutes and twenty-eight seconds, and look what happens."

"It's about time. Listen up, Ma. Here's what I need. First, get rid of this trespasser. Second, I want a damage report, and get to work on fixing any primary systems that have been damaged. Third, I want burritos and beans

and rice, stat. I want salvage bots working over all of the goodies that came down with that Asteroid Wrecker. Make sure you get enough of those lasers back on line to keep the moat from coming down on us, and get to work stabilizing and mapping it. Get me a fresh arm, and set me up for a once over from one of the medical units. Get some pain killers ready, too. Some of the good stuff."

"Right away, Mr. Dee."

"Oh, and one more thing," Karter said as he made his way to the stairs, "Get that data from the case you indexed up in one of the design rooms. This whole experience has piqued my interest."

Chapter 19

Fifteen minutes later, Lex and Karter were back in the upper levels of the Lab. Ma had announced that the food was ready, and had supplied yet another replacement arm. After heaping up their respective cafeteria trays, the men each took a seat.

"Uh... listen. I'm sorry about the... stuff that happened," Lex said, legs tensed for a quick getaway in case Karter had another one of his "episodes." Considering the fact that half of his base and most of his face had been wrecked, Lex was fairly certain he would be justified this time around.

"Meh. It happens," he said, taking a pull off of a beer.

Lex stared at him silently for a moment. A medical probe, probably the same one that had patched up Lex's leg, trundled into the room and started to scan and treat its inventor.

"It happens? That's it?"

"Yeah."

"You almost caved my head in with a crowbar for showing up in a ship later than you expected."

"Well it was a dicky thing to do."

"And yet, you saved my life when I first crashed here."

"That was before I knew you were a dick."

"And now, after a giant corporation declares war on you and almost destroys your whole place, not to mention you, for reasons that kind of, sort of, halfway could be considered my fault, I get 'Meh. It happens.'"

"You want me to go get the crowbar?"

"No! No, I'm just, you know, confused by the rationale."

"I showed you the nuthouse certificate, right? That's my 'Get Out of Rational Thought Free' card. Besides, this takes me back. Remember, Ma? When the crew was together?"

"Yes. Disruptions of this sort were considerably more frequent," she said.

"The crew?" Lex asked.

"Classified," Karter replied.

The pair finished eating while Karter was restored to relative health, then sought out a room a few levels down that Ma had indicated was prepared for their 'research session.' The room looked like something out of a corporation. In the center was a long conference table. Its entire surface was a display, as were three of the walls. The final wall had the door and a long work counter covered with various old fashioned drafting tools, pencils, and pads of paper.

"Is... is that a protractor?" Lex asked.

"No, that's a compass. THAT'S a protractor."

"And what's this?"

"That's a french curve. Quit touching my stuff," he said, taking the odd shaped piece of plastic out of his hand and poking him in the chest, "What do we have, Ma?"

“The analysis of the information has turned up data of two distinct varieties: stellar surveys and cargo manifests.”

Two tables of data appeared in the center of the table. Karter started to dig through, dragging text boxes aside with his fingers.

“Did you get anything on your own?”

“Significant data trends are as follows. A total of one hundred and sixteen stars are listed. All stars listed are main sequence stars. Their distribution is consistent with a random selection algorithm.”

“Wait, random?” Lex said.

Karter nodded.

“It makes sense. If they had something planned for one of these stars, they would want to bury the target of interest in a pile of garbage. What other kind of data was there, Ma?”

“The manifests are displayed on the left. Certain entries were circled. They are highlighted.”

“Arrange them by destination.”

There were a total of seven destination planets, including Operlo. Most had a few dozen different corporations and addresses. Karter stared at the data silently for a few minutes.

“Anything to add?” he asked, glancing at Lex.

“I really didn’t turn anything up when I went to Operlo.”

“Please keep in mind that you are an idiot, and you might have heard something important and not realized it,” Karter helpfully reminded.

“Screw you... Actually... Well, I don’t know what it means, but everybody was referring to the Gemini Project.”

“Ha! Gemini. Classic.”

“You know what it is?”

“No, but the business and military types just love using mythological names for their stuff. Hercules, Juggernaut, Odin. They couldn’t come up with an original name to save their lives. Usually they just go with something vaguely related to their project. Ma. Are any of those stars in the constellation Gemini?”

“No,” replied Ma.

“Worth a shot. Anything else?” Karter asked.

“No... wait... wait, yeah!,” Lex said, “Back when I chauffeured Patel around the first time. He was drunk, like he was celebrating. He said he was closing the biggest business deal of the century. And he had to make it back to Operlo for a meeting or something bad would happen... What did he say? … They’d give bandwidth rights to the guy on the other end. … Whatever that means.”

“Oh, it means plenty. ‘Bandwidth’ plus ‘other end’ equals ‘point to point communication node.’ And if they are talking bandwidth rights, then it is the EM spectrum. Broadcast stuff,” he said, glancing at the parts list, “And these components fit with that. I could see someone putting together some

transmission stuff."

"And one of those destinations is Operlo. I know for a fact that they are building something big there, because they thought I was spying on it. And they were on a really tight schedule," Lex said.

"Okay," Karter said, "Just two problems. There aren't enough components in any one of these locations to do anything worthwhile. And assuming Operlo is one side of the equation, there's no indication which, if any, of these other planets is the other endpoint."

Now it was Lex's turn to stare for a few minutes.

"Hold on... this location is bogus... And so is that one," he said.

"What makes you say that?"

"See this part of the location code. That's the type of facility. This place they're shipping to is temporary holding only. No long term, no pickup, and no local distribution. But they have it listed as the final destination. Unless the people at the processing facility are the ones planning to make use of... twelve thousand kilometers of fiber optic cable, something fishy is going on. Freelancers call that a drop-forward. They are trying to cut the paper trail. Someone picked that up and sent it somewhere after."

"Huh. Who would have thought being a delivery boy would have taught you something useful," Karter said, "Not that it helps, because there's no way to know the final destination."

"Maybe not, but I could make a pretty good guess. Ma, could you put up the seven destinations on a map?"

One of the walls displayed a stellar chart with illuminated points marking the locations of the planets.

"Okay, now can you bring up the VectorCorp routes?"

The map was suddenly buried in a hopelessly complex web of orange lines.

"… That might take a bit to sort through," Lex said squinting.

"Processing... Removing speed restricted routes, commuter routes, and non-cargo routes. For clarity, switching to holographic display," Ma said.

An image flickered into being above the table. Stars hung as points of light in the air. Routes were marked with branching orange threads. It slowly rotated as Lex looked it over.

"Check this out," he said, pointing, "All but Operlo, Draxis, and ADC-29R45 are situated at major intersections of primary trade routes. They were definitely handing off. From the looks of it, anything delivered to these three planets actually went to Operlo... And I'd say that ADC got the rest."

The rest of the points vanished, and the two star systems in question zoomed to full detail.

"You heard him, Ma. Let's combine shipping lists into those two locations."

The data displayed on the table updated, then boxes listing the results appeared next to the appropriate planet in the hologram. Karter looked it over

and shook his head.

"Nope... still not quite enough. How about this, Ma? Both lists are pretty similar. Let's assume they were trying to build the same thing on both sides. Add any items unique to any one list to both."

The lists updated again. Karter nodded, picking up a pad of paper and starting to scribble some notes and diagrams. Ma must have been keeping an eye on his page, because as he traced new shapes, they appeared on the screens behind him.

"It isn't all there, but assuming there were a few small shipments we don't have the manifests for, it looks like they've got a phased array signal amplifier going in both locations. Plus a whole mess of specialized equipment that doesn't fit into the design. Probably that's for generating the signal."

"Okay, so that's what they're doing? A phased array thing? Is that, like, experimental or groundbreaking in any way?" Lex asked.

"Nope. It is pretty much elementary transmission engineering. Nothing worth killing for. We're missing something here. There is no reason to build these things. Those two planets are basically on opposite ends of the colonized galaxy. The design looks like it is meant to focus on a single point, but they are too far apart for them to be broadcasting directly to each other, and focusing that sort of power on a satellite or space station would be severe overkill."

There was silence for a few seconds.

"Ma? Anything?" Lex asked hopefully.

"Analyzing planets for trends. Operlo is a minimally habitable planet. ADC-29R45 is a large, mineral rich asteroid with a small population of workers in a number of surface facilities. Both derive primary power from solar and have a primarily mining based economy."

Lex looked to Karter.

"That's not terribly helpful," the inventor said.

"Expanding to star system level. Both planets orbit stars listed in the included stellar survey data."

"Now THERE'S something," Karter said.

"The stars are exceedingly similar," Ma continued, zooming in to the stars.

The suns hung in the holographic display like little fuzzy fireballs, the hologram detailed enough to display prominences. Next to each, assorted stellar data began to scroll by, visually tabulating into a series of graphs.

"Look at that. Temperature, mass, age, component makeup and distribution. The two are practically identical. Even the magnetic cycles are almost synced up," remarked Karter.

"That's why it is the Gemini Project! The stars are twins!" Lex proclaimed.

"Yes, Lex. Very good. Ma, give Lex a cookie," Karter condescended.

"Well, is this a big deal? I mean, this isn't a coincidence, right? How

likely is it that two stars would be THAT similar?"

"Eh, pretty rare. One in a billion, I'd say."

"That sounds like an awful lot more than 'pretty rare.'"

"There are more than 100 billion stars in the known galaxy, Lex. One in a billion isn't that big of a deal. But, still, I'd say we're looking at part of the big picture."

Several minutes passed, Karter looking over the parts lists and scratching away at his pad. A robotic arm entered the room, gripping a tray with a single oatmeal cookie on it, and presented it to Lex.

"Heh, thanks, Ma," he said, taking the cookie.

"Ma, bring up that piece of crap engineering journal that keeps rejecting my stuff. It was about two years ago, an article about large scale quantum entanglement," he said.

A lengthy piece of technical literature displayed on the table, loaded down with charts, equations, block diagrams, and other nerd porn. He skimmed over it, sketched a few diagrams of his own, and slapped the pad on the table.

"That's what they're doing. That's what the rest of the junk is for. They are going to entangle those stars."

"I don't know what that means."

"Look, they are practically identical, and researchers have decent experimental results that illustrate that it is possible to produce a state of quantum entanglement in two sufficiently similar objects. They are going to entangle two whole stars."

"I still don't know what entanglement is."

"Jeez! Read a book!" Karter raved, "It means connected, okay? Whatever affects one affects the other. You excite one, the other one gets excited, too. Regardless of spatial separation, they get excited at the same time, in the same way. Well, technically the opposite way, and it isn't as simple as that, but that's the explanation that will fit into your head. The important part is that, with a few fancy measurement techniques and these arrays, they should be able to broadcast data into the star and have it radiate out of the other one, zero latency. And with effectively the entire mass of the stars composed of entangled pairs, it would be able to transmit pretty much unlimited data streams in parallel."

"Is THAT enough to kill me over?"

"Well, it would certainly represent a pretty significant profit for them. Anyone with a massive amount of time sensitive data to deliver to someone on the opposite side of the galaxy would want to use it. That is, if it wasn't designed by idiots."

"What do you mean?"

"They built it on the planet's surface! Planets orbit and revolve. Unless they built it on the pole, and the pole was facing the sun – which isn't the case on either planet – then you are looking at a transmitter that is only optimally situated to transmit a maximum of once a day. And with an axial tilt like that,

more like twice a year. Plus, both planets would need to have their transmitters aligned at the same time. Ma, how often would that happen?"

"Based upon likely construction locations and orbital and revolutionary rates, optimal transmission states would exist for approximately twenty-six minutes a day for a seven week period every thirty-three years," she answered.

"That's ridiculous," Lex said.

"Yes, it is. Anyone with half a brain would have made a space station or a statite. Something that would have a guaranteed clear shot at the sun. Hell, a Dyson shell or sphere is practically perfect for this."

"Well what is the benefit of building one on a planet?"

"Faster and cheaper. That's about it."

"Well the Operlo folks were trying to get things done fast, so time is probably the problem. Maybe they were trying to beat someone to market?"

"You'd have to purchase two whole stars in order to do this. I don't think there's another entity out there that could afford to even attempt it."

Lex stared at the walls and table, now completely covered with text, figures, diagrams, equations, and other things he couldn't make heads or tails of. Finally, inside a clump of words he couldn't even pronounce in the journal paper, he saw one word he knew.

"Well, what about that? It says singularity. That's a black hole, right?"

"Yes, the study says that the entanglement procedure has a small risk of halting solar output, causing a drop in internal pressure and a gravitational collapse. Pretty darn fast, too. In a matter of years you'd have a new black hole, which is the blink of an eye in astronomical time. It's effectively impossible to do by accident, though, because you would have to pump several orders of magnitude too much juice into the procedure."

"Well, you said that the thing was overkill. Could it do that?"

"Ma?"

"The required output to reliably cause a gravitational collapse is approximately 5% below the maximum output of the proposed array."

Silence remained for a few minutes.

"… W-o-ow," said Karter, finally, "Well done, VectorCorp. That's probably the most destructive thing I've ever heard of. Well, second most. Hey, Ma, when's the next transmission alignment?"

"Without accurate location data, it is difficult to give a specific date. The seven week window could have begun as many as eleven days ago, and or as many as twenty-seven days from now," she replied.

"So what is it? A weapon?"

"A hell of a good one, too. It can take out whole star systems. Not very practical, though. Judging by the dates on those shipments, they've been working on this for over a year. Good luck keeping that sort of thing a secret from your enemies. However... if they entangle the stars, then collapse them... Two identical, entangled stars collapsing into black holes at the same

moment? With stars of that size..." he said, scribbling some figures, "Yep, you'd end up with a stable, navigable wormhole. A shortcut from one side of galaxy to the other. Put it up on the hologram, Ma."

The view zoomed out to show almost the entire colonized portion of the Milky Way galaxy, which covered a wide swath of one of the arms. The two ends of the wormhole were marked.

"Look at that. That's a game changer right there. It would revolutionize interstellar travel," Karter said.

"Not only that. Ma, put up the VectorCorp routes again, please," Lex said.

At this scale, the routes were spiderweb thin strands of orange, arranging themselves into denser clusters around denser star and planet clusters. The only void was a stretch of space in the center of the display.

"Now put up the Rehnquist and JPW routes."

The void in the center filled in with yellow and blue. The two ends of the wormhole were on either side of the contested area. Lex's eyes widened.

"They found a way to cut out the middle men... This wormhole gives them access to both sides of the galaxy without having to pay anyone else."

"I don't think they'd be able to completely stop using the middle for very long. The wormhole would only be wide enough to allow a medium sized trade route. It'd get backed up in a hurry if they used it exclusively," Karter said.

"They wouldn't have to use it for long. JPW and Rehnquist make pretty much all of their money off of the fees VC pays them. If VC could quit for even two months, they'd go belly up, and VC could just buy them out. They'd have a complete monopoly on communication and transit," Lex said.

"You pretty much 'win' business at that point. Every email, every voice message, every bank transaction, every package, ANYTHING that needs to go between planets would owe you a cut of the profits. Civilization as we know it would depend solely upon one company. And if the governments don't like it? Oh, we just happen to have a weapon that can collapse your sun into a black hole," Karter said, "Yeah, I'd say keeping the lid on that is good enough reason to kill some people."

"So... Just to recap, some time in the next two or three weeks, VectorCorp is going to wipe out two whole star systems and set in motion a series of events that will let them, essentially, conquer the galaxy."

"So it seems," Karter nodded.

Once again, they sat in silence. Karter started gathering and summarizing the data and diagrams. Lex stared blankly ahead and slowly took a bite of his cookie.

Chapter 20

After a few minutes, Karter finished working over the data and began to tidy up his papers.

"Well, that's that figured out. Ma, record the design and run simulations for viability to make sure I figured it out right. We're done here. I guess you'll be moving on now," the inventor said, as though nothing had happened.

"Wh- What? We're not done here! We have to address this!"

"No we don't. All I wanted to do was figure out what the big deal was about that data, and I only wanted to do that because Agent what's his name didn't want me to, and screw him. My role in this is over," Karter said, getting up and stretching.

"But, we just figured out that a corporation is essentially about to conquer the galaxy! Two whole star systems are going to get sucked into black holes!"

"Oh, they are not. God, I hate when people say stuff like that. Listen, black holes don't just spontaneously create more gravity when they form. They are the same amount of mass, just higher density. In fact, the formation of a black hole is usually an explosive process, so the resulting singularity usually has LESS gravity than the original star."

"… So the planets will be okay?"

"Oh, hell no. Those things are doomed. We're probably talking about an extremely short lived pulsar or a supernova. Either way, loads of radiation spraying out in unhealthy doses. If the planets don't get roasted, the gravitational profile of the star will definitely have changed, so there's a good chance that the orbit will decay, in which case it WILL get sucked in, or else it will just get hurled into space. And even if none of that happens, the source of all power for the planet will be gone. So the population of all of those planets will die, but the odds of them getting sucked in are pretty slim," he explained, "Though it would be pretty cool, because they'd just go whipping out the other side of the wormhole."

"And you're okay with that? You don't feel any obligation to help those people?"

"What are we talking about, mobsters and miners? A couple hundred thousand of each? That's not even one decent-sized city on a real planet. Earthquakes have wiped out more. No big loss. In my experience, most people are assholes. Getting rid of a half million of them will just raise the net quality of the universe."

"Well what about VectorCorp? You're just going to sit idle while a company, one that is willing to kill whole planets, seizes complete control over the whole galaxy?"

"Like it is going to make any difference. And quit talking about the 'whole galaxy.' We're talking about the ten or fifteen percent we hang out in."

"We've got to call someone! We've got to warn people!"

"And how are you going to do that? VectorCorp already does all of the

communication in this area, and the only encryption strong enough to be fairly sure VC couldn't read it would have to have already been set up with the receiving party, at least with a password. And even then, you'd have to send it from somewhere besides here, because they have almost certainly cut off communication in this region."

Lex's mouth opened and closed uselessly as he tried to put together a valid course of action.

"At any rate, I'm going to start going over what needs to be fixed. I want you the hell out of here as soon as Ma comes up with an exit window," Karter said, marching off, his freshly replaced Solby in tow.

Lex sat down and stared at the floor.

"It would appear that this new information has not decreased your stress levels," said Ma.

"No. That it most certainly did not. You got knocked around a bit. You sounded kind of messed up before. Are you okay?"

"There are no lingering effects, and recent backups exist in the event of unforeseen future degradation. A number of my debris field sensors have been damaged. I am fabricating and deploying replacements. An exit window that meets the specifications of your skill set and ship should be identifiable in approximately eighteen hours. Until then, is there anything I can help you with?"

"Yeah. You can tell me what to do."

"Issuing orders is not my role. I can offer advice if you like."

"Please."

"What is your dilemma?"

"What is my dilemma? I just found out that at least two planets with people on them are going to be frozen, crushed, blown up, or roasted."

"That is likely. What is your dilemma?"

"I can't do anything about it, that's what!"

"That is unfortunate. What is your dilemma?"

"How can I live with myself knowing that this is going to happen if I don't do anything?"

"Simple. Had you not received that package, this would have happened without your foreknowledge. Had you died in the crash upon this planet when you first confronted Agent Fisk, or had you chosen virtually any other place to hide, or had timing and good fortune turned out any differently on both Tessera and Operlo, you would be dead and this would have happened regardless. It was the most probable outcome, and remains so. Your knowledge in no way obligates you to take action, and no action is likely to significantly alter the outcome. Thus, you could in no way be considered at fault for the coming events."

"That's all well and good, Ma, knowing that doesn't make me feel any better. It isn't that easy."

"Why?"

"It just isn't. You know what I mean?"

"No, Lex, I do not. As you quite flatteringly seem to have forgotten, I am not human. As a nonhuman, I lack the implicit knowledge of human nature that you enjoy. It is not something that can be programmed, or at least is beyond Karter's skill, which means I am left only with observation. Karter, I think you will agree, is a less than ideal example."

"You can say that again."

"I attempted to absorb what information is present in media and entertainment, but the depictions of human behavior and interaction contained therein do not appear to be entirely accurate. You, Mr. Alexander, are the best example of a typical, well adjusted human that I have had the good fortune to interact with for any reasonable duration."

"That's... kind of sad."

"Thus, I ask you again, why do you feel as though the weight of this tragedy, if it occurs, will fall upon your shoulders, in the figurative sense."

"You've tried to save my life. You succeeded in saving my life, in fact. You know that saving lives is the right thing to do."

"I did so only when it was within my ability to do so, and without risking another life unnecessarily."

"Well... Well that's the difference, then. When you see someone in trouble, you are supposed to help. You see a woman about to be hit by a bus, you push her aside, even if it means you get hit. That's what you're supposed to do. That's what a MAN does. If you really know that it is the right thing, there is no such thing as risking your life unnecessarily. Risking your life is necessary, period. Anything less is cowardice."

"Why is that?"

"That's just the way it is. At least, that's the way it is supposed to be. I guess that doesn't make much sense to you."

"To the contrary, that is a behavior that I fully understand. It is an imperative, a directive. I am designed with a number of base imperatives. They are used to weight my behavior. Failing to fulfill one requires an extreme circumstance, and I am programmed to avoid doing so at all reasonable costs. Self sacrifice for the greater good is evidently a societal imperative for humanity, or at least for you. Let us test the limits of the directive. If this hypothetical woman were to slip and fall from a ledge, would you be obliged to hurl yourself after her?"

"What, just because? With no safety gear?"

"Affirmative."

"Of course not."

"Would her resulting death weigh upon your conscience?"

"No. I mean, I'd feel bad that it happened, but there's nothing I could have done."

"Then your anxiety is out of place. There is no evidence to suggest that risking your life would make an appreciable difference in the course of events

regarding the Gemini Project."

Lex considered the statement. Slowly he shook his head.

"I don't know. It just... I don't-"

"It is a binary condition, hinging upon the variable of ability. If you can help, you are obligated to do so. If you cannot, you should feel no personal fault. Since you do feel fault, your anxiety MUST stem from the belief that you have the ability to prevent this tragedy. If this is so, then you must pay any price to achieve such a goal, by your own rules. It is vital that one follow one's own rules."

"You're saying that you think that I think I can save the day, and that's why I'm all torn up?"

"I am saying that based upon known equations and known variables it is the only reasonable conclusion."

"Okay, well supposing that I do feel like I could do something, and I'm not saying that I do, what possible chance could I have?"

"There are numerous highly unlikely or excessively dangerous circumstances that would prevent the destruction of the star systems. The sabotaging or destruction of either or both phased arrays."

"No way. The last time those guys attacked us it took a black hole and a bunch of lasers to fend them off, and that was on our own turf. By now they've got to have both of those places locked down tight."

"The delay or prevention of the activation of one or both arrays until after the planetary alignment has passed would provide approximately thirty-three years in which to formulate a more permanent solution."

"Yeah, but how would I do that? They said something about a final security audit before activation. That means they are probably all set and ready to go right now. They could activate it any minute," Lex said, but he paused, the twinkle of inspiration in his eye, "But they won't."

"You sound confident of that."

"They've got their State of the Company thing coming up. Some shareholders meeting. Preethy, Patel's secretary, said they wouldn't do anything to lose face before that. They wouldn't want some massive disaster stealing their thunder. They aren't going to activate the arrays until after the press conference, I guarantee it... And they won't activate it at ALL if it could be traced back to the company. All I have to do is get the word out. That's why they've been trying so hard to kill me. To keep me from doing it!"

"Then your solution hinges upon distributing proof of their intentions."

"Yes! That's probably what Sarah Jones was trying to do when she handed me this info. Obviously whoever she was trying to contact has been found out. We just need to find some other way."

"They control almost all communication. Hand delivering the information could bypass their security, but that is a slow process, and they will likely find and silence you and any you are likely to reach."

"… There's got to be a way."

And so the hours began to pass, man and AI working together to find a solution. Ma was not precisely creative, but she was comprehensive, seemingly able to see any scenario from all angles simultaneously. She was an inexhaustible source of figures and data, offering up transit times, probable security precautions, and a multitude of other facts at a moment's notice. What she did not do, however, was suggest courses of action. That was left to Lex. He supplied the outlandish ideas, trading away huge amounts of safety in exchange for tiny doses of opportunity. Every resource currently available or conceivably within reach was considered, and finally, with several hours remaining before it would be safe to leave, they had settled upon a desperate and foolish plan so layered with contingencies and a veritable alphabet of Plan Bs that it had at least a whisper of a chance to save lives.

"Right. So that's the best we can do," Lex said.

"Indeed. Would you like to know the success calculations?"

"… I don't know... DO I want to know?"

"I very much doubt it."

"Well hit me with them anyway."

"Probability of substantially decreasing loss of life: 48%. Probability of preventing activation of the array: 21%. Probability of your own survival: 12%."

"Wow... Those are very low. Maybe we should take another whack at this."

"These represent, by a wide margin, the best outcome scores we've yet devised. Improving upon them in the time allotted with the resources available is doubtful."

"How exactly do you come up with numbers for this sort of thing anyway?"

"My modeling methods utilize advanced actuarial science techniques combined with successive simulation based upon known parameters to produce-"

"Hold it, hold it! Sorry, my brain sort of shuts down after you mention enough things I've never heard of in the same sentence. Can you dumb it down a little please."

"Magic," Ma replied.

Lex laughed, "That's about my level. You know, Ma, when you and I first met, you were a lot more, uh, computer-y. Lots of 'processing' and stuff like that. Now you're joking around."

"Due to the limitations of my User Interface Module, I am incapable of sounding precisely as a human being would. In my rare interactions with humans, I became aware that, if a machine's appearance and behavior cannot perfectly reflect humanity, then the closer it comes to perfection without achieving it, the more uncomfortable legitimate humans feel. The so called uncanny valley. I thus prefer to conform to a more traditional automated behavioral pattern in order to ease tension."

"What made you stop doing that with me?"

"Initially because I felt you were inconsiderate and thus no longer deserving of that courtesy. Subsequently you revealed yourself to be more capable of accepting me as an individual than most."

"To be honest, I've just sort of been pretending you're a person."

"To be honest, so have I."

Lex looked over the various notes and supplies that were now listed on the displays of the room, the details of his plan. The door opened, and a mechanical arm rolled in clutching a printed out summary of the mission.

"It is time to see if Karter is willing to play his part," she said.

Lex stood and straightened his clothes.

"What are the odds we'll convince him?"

"You don't want to know."

The mechanical arm continued to roll along beside him as he followed the lights that would lead him to Karter. Ma had probably calculated that having some physical representation of her beside him would make him feel a little more at ease. She was right. It was actually astounding that Karter could have built a machine that was so much better at being a decent human being than he was.

Before long the lights came to a stop at the door to one of the work rooms a few floors up. It was the room nearest to the surface that was still fully functional, and seemed to have been Karter's base of operations for the last few hours. A glance through the display window revealed tools and parts strewn across every flat surface and a long list of damaged systems with estimated times of repair completion slowly scrolling by on a display screen. Some of them were measured in weeks. In the center of it all was Karter, who was sprawled precariously back on his chair, mouth wide open and engaged in what was either an epic snore or an earnest attempt to inhale his own tongue.

Lex knocked on the window, causing the snoring to stop abruptly. Karter's head turned vaguely in the direction of the window, eyes squinted. They remained that way as he clumsily got to his feet and opened the door.

"Karter, listen, I need your-" Lex blurted.

"Hold on a minute," Karter said, rubbing his barely open eyes.

He leaned heavily on the doorway, fished a grease pencil out of his pocket, and scrawled something on the door. When he was finished, he slammed it in Lex's face. The message was a tersely worded statement inviting him to consume excrement and subsequently expire.

"For Karter, that was an act of remarkable restraint. This is encouraging," Ma stated.

"Yeah, I'm feeling really optimistic about this whole endeavor now," Lex said, banging on the window again.

"Go away!" Karter growled, settling down into his chair and pivoting away from the window.

"I need your help, Karter."

"You always need help. You are a clingy little waste of space. Take off the diapers and solve your own problems. I've got bigger concerns."

"You've got bigger concerns than saving whole planets?!"

"I am more interested in the contents of my belly button than I am in rescuing a bunch of strangers."

"I'm not asking you to team up with me and go running into combat guns a-blazing. I just want you to supply some equipment."

Karter angrily launched to his feet and stormed back to the door, throwing it open. Lex raised his hands defensively and backed to the wall.

"Do you have any idea how LONG it has been since someone actually woke me up? Years. YEARS!" he ranted, "I have been on my own schedule, doing my own thing, alone, for the better part of a god damn decade. And it has been AWESOME. Anyone I dealt with was either paying me or working for me, and not once did I have to clean blood off of a whole batch of funks. Now ONE person shows up and I'm looking at weeks of repair work. You think I'm eager to clutter up the universe with few hundred thousand more knuckleheads like you? Screw that. And while you're at it, screw you. With the most uncomfortable apparatus you can find. We're not friends, Lex. You understand that? We weren't friends when we met, and this whole mess we just survived didn't forge some kind of stuck-in-a-foxhole bond. All you are is a guy who fell out of the sky and started annoying me. You're a pretty decent pilot, but all that means is that you've got exactly one more worthwhile skill than my dead grandmother. And in case my opinion of you hasn't been made clear-"

In lieu of further comment, Karter reared back and headbutted Lex directly in the forehead. With a soft, wet thud from Lex's skull and a decidedly metallic clunk from Karter's, the pilot fell to the ground.

"Consider that a period at the end of the sentence," Karter sneered.

Lex lay still for a moment, waiting for the room around him to do the same. He was distantly aware of the door slamming again, but his greater concern was dealing with the suddenly challenging task of focusing his eyes.

"That was more indicative of his expected reaction," Ma said.

"Yeah... yeah, that was about what I expected, too," Lex said, making a brief and unsuccessful attempt to raise his head.

The mechanical arm rolled forward and delivered three sharp clicks on the window.

"No, no, don't do-" Lex objected.

"If I have to come out there again, it's going to be an exclamation point," growled Karter.

"No more punctuation!" squeaked Lex.

"Mr. Alexander would like to volunteer his services to field test some of your in-development projects in a real world, espionage scenario," Ma stated.

There were several beats of silence, during which Lex managed to hoist himself to his elbows. Then the door swung open.

"Which ones?" Karter asked, one eyebrow raised.

Lex woozily extended the hand containing the printed battle plan. Karter snatched it, flipped through it, and frowned.

"This plan is going to get you killed. What good does it do me to have you test my stuff and then have you die before reporting your findings?"

"If Mr. Alexander is able to survive by utilizing your equipment, then the tests would be considered an unequivocal success. His death indicates a failure."

Karter looked over the pages again, then squinted his eyes and stared off into the distance, thinking.

"Yeah, sounds good," he said, finally, "Get up, we've got work to do."

With that, Karter stepped over the downed guest and marched with purpose down the hall. The mechanical arm gingerly helped Lex to his feet.

"Karter can be made to behave reasonably when given the proper incentive," she explained.

Before Lex could respond, Karter's voice bellowed from down the hall, "Let's go! Just because I'm helping you out doesn't mean I want you hanging around any longer than you have to. Move it!"

Chapter 21

Eight hours had passed, and Karter was just dusting off his hands after finishing the final piece of equipment. They were in the lab's repair hanger once more, loading the inventor's contributions into Lex's ship. Karter had a broad grin on his face. On a normal man, a smile was a good sign. Considering the sort of things Lex had seen Karter say and do in just the short time he had known him, seeing him with a smile on his face was like seeing a chimp with a butcher knife; very unusual, and seldom a good thing.

"Man, it has been a while since I took that many alpha level projects and pushed them to feature complete beta in a single day. Hey, Ma. How much time before Lex here launches?" Karter asked.

"Based upon our current data acquisition rate and the distribution of debris in processed data, reliable windows suitable for Lex will be identifiable in less than twenty-five minutes."

"Good, time enough for a celebration. Ma, hit up the stash. Two packs, and a couple of adult beverages."

"Look, Karter, not that I don't appreciate it, but if you were planning on offering one of those packs to me, you can skip it. I'm not sure I'd be able to survive whatever it is you celebrate with,"
Lex objected.

"Shut your face and grow a pair. I'm feeling hospitable, indulge me," he said.

A door opened and one of the seemingly endless supply of mobile robotic arms that represented Ma when she needed to interact with physical objects rolled in. It was bearing a tray with a small stack of colorful packages carefully arranged on it, and the speed at which it had been fetched suggested that she had anticipated the request. Karter grabbed one and quickly tore the plastic wrapper off, unfolding an old fashioned paper carton and slipping out a dark red, rough looking cylinder, leaving five behind in the package.

"What is that, a cigar?" Lex asked, snagging a box from the tray and inspecting it.

"Better than that," Karter said, running the item beneath his nose and inhaling the aroma in a decidedly cigar-like manner, "Cigars are inefficient addiction vectors. These babies are streamlined."

It took Lex several moments to actually identify the product name. Whereas most things you'll find on a store shelf have an attractive package with a clearly visible name, this one seemed to be composed entirely of multicolored fine print, detailing a list of health risks that ran from increased blood pressure to chemical dependency. Finally he realized that the lines and rows of colored letters were arranged like pixels to form the product's logo.

"RJ Slims Vice Stix?!" Lex said scoffed.

Ever since the day man first dripped a coffee bean in chocolate, society had been heading down a slippery slope. It began a quest to combine all of the

tiny, legal highs that the average person craves into a single, mass produced package. The inevitable conclusion to this noble pursuit was the very product that Lex now held in his hands. A result of the unholy union of tobacco companies and the snack industry, the "classic" RJ Slims were nicotine infused, caffeinated, maple cured, smoked meat sticks. Combining all of the best (and worst) parts of bacon, cigarettes, coffee, and candy, the only significant addictions they didn't cater to were alcohol, opiates, and cannabis. These oversights were solved with "RJ Slims Kentucky Colonels," "RJ Slims Orient Blend," and "RJ Slims Herbal Blend" respectively. Their popularity was immediate, and despite a veritable arms race of warnings and taxes, they continued to sell exceptionally well for a number of years. First warnings on the packages, then commercials 90% composed of warnings of the consequences of over consumption. Sales slowed a bit once the clerks were legally obligated to deliver a 300 word verbal warning with each purchase, but it wasn't until a certain event some years later that they were finally shoved from impulse counters around the galaxy.

"I thought these things were outlawed after that twelve year old's heart exploded," Lex said, recalling the news reports.

"Nah, you just have to buy them factory direct now and sign and notarize a waiver. Which, if you ask me, is total crap. One pansy-ass tween bursts a ventricle and suddenly I have to get lawyers involved at snack time," he said, snapping into the concoction and reverently chewing it. The look on his face was utter bliss, "Oh, that is bad in all the right ways."

Lex looked at the pack doubtfully.

"Come on, it'll put hair on your chest," Karter prodded.

"It is statistically more likely to cause your teeth to fall out than promote hair growth," Ma corrected.

"Yeah, I'll pass," Lex said, sliding it back onto the tray.

"Suit yourself, more for me," said his host, taking another bite, "So you must be excited about this whole project, huh? Finally found a worthwhile thrill."

"... You think I'm looking forward to this? You think I WANT to risk my life?"

"Pff. I KNOW you do. It's who you are. You're a thrill seeker."

"What makes you think that?"

"Well, you became a freelancer. You don't pick a job like that for the retirement options."

"Hey, you said it yourself. I'm a good pilot. The only thing I ever wanted to do was race, but I'm not allowed to do that anymore. It was either freelance or let my skills go to waste."

"Oh come on."

"Name one other job I could have done that would have put my skills to the test."

"Test. Pilot," Karter stated, raising a finger with each word, as though

counting off.

For a moment, Lex was silent.

"Don't even pretend like you hadn't thought about it. I've worked for plenty of legitimate engineering firms in my day, and we sent recruiters to all of the tracks. I guarantee you heard from them. High pay, health care, the works. Good pilots are in ridiculously high demand, so they pay top dollar."

It was true. No less than three different companies had contacted him during his racing days. One of them twice. Even after the disgrace he'd had someone show up at his door. He'd turned them down without so much as a second thought because... because...

As though he'd been listening in on the struggling line of reasoning, Karter chimed in. "You couldn't do that because it isn't exciting enough. Too much safety net. Too much stability. Too many rules. Too much structure. Not only that, but it isn't visible enough, either. The chances of someone getting really famous doing it are next to nil, and you are all about the spectacle. You want to be the center of attention."

"Now that's just a lie. You don't get famous being a freelancer! The LAST thing I want is public attention."

"Buddy, you dove off a building into traffic during rush hour. What was that supposed to be, low key?"

"That's different, I didn't have a choice."

"Maybe, maybe not. But do me a favor, think back to the last few weeks, the last few months, and see how many times you put your life on the line, and how many times you did it in full view of a crowd of spectators. I found a burnt up tuxedo in your wrecked ship, for God's sake. I'm going to repeat that. A burnt up tuxedo... in a wrecked space ship."

Lex had no intention of actually indulging this man and his idiotic accusations, but unfortunately the surest way to think about something is to try not to. Thus, he recalled the whole mess on Tessera, and the escape after. He thought about his stunt with the limousine and Diamond Nick. He thought about the pointless risks he would take as a hand courier, the excessive danger of the jukes he took as a freelancer. Steadily, a sequence of foolish, adrenaline charged stunts he'd pulled in the past that he didn't strictly have to do began to form. It was a long list, and the dawning realization showed on his face.

"I... I mean... I admit, that's not normal, but-"

"Stop. You're going to make an excuse for not being normal and I have no interest in hearing that. Honestly, people always talk about 'normal' as though it is something to aspire to, but that's a load of crap. Normal isn't an achievement, it's a baseline. Normal is something you end up as if you never get around to doing something interesting. You crave attention, speed, challenge, and wealth. Racing was the only thing that fed all of your needs at once, and you've been piecing together a replacement ever since you got muscled out of it. I say keep at it. If nothing else, it'll make for an interesting obituary. Which would you rather read about; some hundred and eighty year

old family man who went quietly in his sleep, or a lunatic in a souped up spaceship getting gunned down while armed to the teeth with untested technology?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure I know which one I'd rather BE."

"Really? Are you now?" Karter said doubtfully. He twisted the meat concoction before him. "We've all got our addictions, Lex. Those little things that we know are bad for us, but we do anyway. You know how you know an addiction when you see one? It is when you enjoy something and tell yourself you don't, or when you don't enjoy something and tell yourself you do. The worst is when it is both at the same time."

He finished his celebratory treat and washed it down with a beer. Lex said nothing.

"I'm hungry now. Vice Stix always give me an appetite. Ma, get food ready."

"Beans, Rice, and Burritos will be available shortly after Mr. Alexander's departure."

"Do I keep showing up on beans and rice day, or is that seriously all you eat?" Lex asked.

"Beans and Rice are a complete protein. Everything a growing boy needs. I think Ma adds vitamins to the mix, too."

"Variety is the spice of life, though."

"Meh, food is fuel. I like to keep it simple. Easier that way," he said with a shrug, turning to admire the ship, "Oh, that reminds me. You still haven't christened this sucker. You think that dogfight gave you enough of a feel to know what to call it?"

Lex looked at the sleek black vessel and thought back to the short, intense flight that seemed like it had happened weeks ago.

"It isn't Betsy, but it's definitely in the same family. Sort of the next generation. How about Son of Betsy?"

"Sounds good to me. By the power vested in me, I hereby christen this ship Son of Betsy," he said, heaving his empty beer bottle at the ship. As it shattered, he fired off a salute, "The mighty S.O.B."

"Wait, it doesn't sound good when you say it like that," Lex objected.

"Too late. Already threw the bottle."

"In order to be in position to utilize any identified windows quickly, it is advised that you launch SOB as soon as possible," Ma stated.

Grumbling, Lex climbed into the ship. What was it with him and nicknames?

"Try very hard not to die!" Karter called after him, "And if you do get killed, make sure to use your dying breath to convince someone to send me the field data from those devices!"

The system start procedure began, Lex ticking a mental checklist for each step. As he did, Ma's voice sounded over the communicator.

"Your ship is fully fueled, optimally cooled, and lubricated. A full system

check reads all parameters nominal. A twenty-one day supply of water and MRE rations has been stowed in the cockpit-accessible storage, and your programmable transponder has been repaired and reinstalled, complete with a refreshed complement of ship codes, including numerous up-to-date police and emergency values. Karter was able to determine and replicate your means of activation and deactivation, and your hidden sub-menu has been given an overhaul in order to increase usability, legibility, and responsiveness."

"You didn't have to do that, Ma," Lex said, "Thanks."

"You, as always, are perfectly welcome, Mr. Alexander. I also wish for you to know that, whereas Karter is primarily interested in your survival due to the increased feedback you will be able to provide following your experience, I encourage your survival based upon general principles. And to be frank, I rather enjoy your company. It is my hope that you will visit again in the near future."

Lex smiled as he guided the ship into the air and out of the hangar doors. "I'm not sure Karter would appreciate that."

"With all due deference to my creator and his desires, screw Karter. This one is for me," she said.

Lex laughed out loud. "I'll tell you what. If I survive this, we'll keep in touch."

"That is extremely agreeable, Lex. Thank you. Please proceed to the following coordinates and await a visual trajectory through the debris field. And Lex?"

"Yes?"

"May the aggregated statistical aberrations inherent to any high risk enterprise convolve to facilitate a favorable outcome to this endeavor."

"…"

"Good luck, Lex."

"You were just trying to make up for being so un-computer-like with the 'screw Karter' remark, weren't you?"

"Processing... That is not an entirely inaccurate assessment. Standby for exit window. Talk to you soon."

"Here's hoping.'"

A countdown appeared on his display, and superimposed on his cockpit view was a jagged-walled digital corridor with a color coded timing; a visual representation of his narrow and carefully calculated escape window. With a few last adjustments to his seat, to the controls, and to the hatches and panels within the pilot's cabin, Lex flared his engines and entered the field.

It was easier this time. When he came in through it the first time he was flying by the seat of his pants and being fired on. When he left it was in the DAR, an excellent ship, but nothing like Betsy. Now he was in a new and improved version of his old ship. As a souped up version of stock, the handling was completely different than it had been. That should have made things difficult, but a little dogfighting and a difficult to describe feeling of

familiarity had quickly given him a firm grasp on the controls, and the razor thin ribbon of safety felt like a four lane highway as a result. In no time he was in open space, plotting his trip forward.

First would be a series of random jumps. A long series of random jumps. Followed by a longer series of them. Then a few more. There was a better than average chance that Big Sigma was being watched by some people who weren't going to be shaken by just one or two stops. So he twisted and sprinted, sometimes with a transponder on, sometimes with it off, but never matching his own. He looped and backtracked, crisscrossed and zigzagged, and when he was absolutely sure that no one could keep track of him, he did three more jumps. The process took about half a day, and thanks to the almost unbelievably powerful engines he was now sporting it had covered an impressive amount of space. With the paranoia gods appeased, he began his mission in earnest.

The first stop was a populated planet, it didn't matter which one, to drop off a message and a bribe to ensure its delivery. Trying to communicate effectively without dragging any new people into this mess was a tricky puzzle to work out, but he and Ma had decided that, if he kept the message short, deeply encrypted it, and sent it along with a short unencrypted message including a hint as to what password could access it, then gave it to a stranger to send, and made sure it wasn't sent while he was on-planet, then at the very least it wouldn't get caught by their network sniffers. It also might not get to the intended recipient, depending on how dependable the stranger was, or if the person on the other end couldn't figure out the password, but for this portion of the plan "making things better" fell well behind "not making things worse" in importance.

Two more messages were delivered in the same way. Then came the part he was hoping he would have been able to avoid. He pulled up his star maps and his calendar. The VectorCorp State of the Company speech would be taking place on their corporate homeworld in just over four days. If he was right, then he had at least until then to do what he had to do, but probably not much longer. In that time, he would need to make it to their headquarters, break in, find ironclad evidence of their intentions regarding the Gemini project, and find some way to broadcast that information far and wide without them being able to sensor it. The task had been plotted out, and he had some fairly impressive toys to help him, but at this point in his life Lex could count on one hand the number of things that worked in reality as well as they'd worked on paper.

After crunching the numbers, he worked out that if he pushed the new ship as hard as he could, and took as straight a path as was possible without effectively guaranteeing a collision, then he could get there with about twelve hours to spare... Good God was this ship fast. Twelve hours wasn't going to leave him much wiggle room to be careful and subtle in his infiltration, but it was the best he was going to get, so he entered the waypoints into his

machine, crossed his fingers, and shifted to FTL. He fully expected to start running into difficulties within the first thirty seconds.

To his surprise, it ended up taking nearly an hour.

That was when, during a routine slowdown to check for emergency broadcasts and other warnings, he discovered that security and law enforcement were on high alert. He knew they would be, but he'd never imagined what a difference it would make. Sensors were canvasing areas that should have been completely devoid of life. Radio channels were alive with chatter, relaying warnings, reports, and tips. The narrow areas around VC routes where patrols usually ran had swollen like the banks of a river during monsoon season, spreading a thin but visible security presence over huge swaths of the sky. What little snippets of communication he was able to hear over his universal receiver were all obviously, but not explicitly, about him and his VectorCorp problems. He heard himself described a dozen times, for the first time making him thankful that he wasn't particularly distinctive looking. All around the galaxy they must have been arresting lanky brown-haired twenty-somethings on suspicion of being him. They also described the ships he'd been seen in, which included the now deceased Betsy, and the DAR he'd been loaned. Neither even remotely resembled his current ship, which was virtually his only stroke of good luck. And he needed it, because if the transmissions were to be believed, he was wanted for a laundry list of charges.

The crimes he was suspected of ran the gamut from disturbing the public peace and vandalism to breaking and entering, reckless use of a space vessel, and of course, intellectual property theft. VectorCorp was never listed as the victim of this threat, but they were repeatedly cited as being "fully cooperative in the assisted apprehension and identification of the culprit." As far as the public knew, VC was just doing their civic duty, lending manpower to help lock up this mastermind in the ways of espionage. Notably absent was any mention of a disturbance on Operlo, or of an Asteroid Wrecker being destroyed. It was truly disturbing how tightly VC controlled the news and communication. Mysteriously, there was likewise no mention of his name, at least on the official bands. Lex had a sneaky suspicion that VectorCorp didn't actually want the police such to catch him. No, they just wanted him chased into a corner, where they could sweep him up, get their data back, and make him disappear without pesky things like paperwork or a trial.

The anti-detection countermeasures that Karter had included were doing their job, but Lex didn't want to press his luck any harder than he had to, so portions of his trip that should have been straight runs became gentle curves in and out, nudging just a bit wider and moving just a bit more carefully to minimize time spent in the widened patrol zones. Day long sections that he should have been able to at least TRY to sleep through instead required that he constantly ease and adjust his trajectory, hands always on the controls. As his destination grew nearer, the patrol density grew thicker. Finally, there

were no two ways about it, he would have to slip into an official transit lane. He simply couldn't risk getting stopped this close to VectorCorp HQ doing something that looked even remotely suspicious. It would mean that he was closed in, and subject to whatever security sweeps they might have set up, but he also would be in the center of a congested flow of ships funneling through one of the galaxy's main arteries. Even with the manpower that VC had, they couldn't check every one of the ships passing through, and he wasn't carrying anything that would show up on their scanners as suspicious. That was because the stuff he'd brought along hadn't existed long enough to make it onto their watch lists yet.

As he maneuvered his ship into a trade lane and secured a travel window, he caught himself grinning. They were going to have to update those lists.

Chapter 22

By the time he was dropping back out of FTL outside the destination star system, his narrow 12 hour buffer had been shaved to a sliver. The smattering of side conferences and news reports had already started, the business equivalent to a pregame show. In less than two hours the CEO would speak. When he was through, the broadcasters and bloggers would run his words through the meat grinder, form the resulting mush into their news bites, and pack up and head home. The stock would spike or dip, depending on whether the investors liked what they heard, and the public interest would wander. The streamlined flow of information afforded by the net meant that news cycles had shrunk from days to hours. Realistically, it might be as little as two days before enough time had passed that the disaster could safely occur with no financial impact on the company. Lex didn't have that long, though. If what he had in mind was going to work, he would need as many cameras on hand as possible. He had to get this done DURING the press event. That was the plan at least.

Ah, yes, the plan. He settled the ship into an automated holding pattern and began to work through what he and the AI had managed to put together. He remembered reading somewhere that if you were working with a plan with many possible points of failure, the best thing to do was to work backwards from your intended goal until you reached your current point. Reformulating it at every step of the way ensured that, no matter what had gone wrong thus far, you had a clear path to victory. It had made plenty of sense when he was reading it, and he'd decided that if he ever had some epic undertaking, he would do that. Now that he was staring down the barrel of a task that would give a special ops team a hard time, he found the fatal flaw in that line of reasoning. Specifically, you would have to be some sort of super genius to throw together a full plan at every step of the way. After losing his train of thought seven or eight times, he decided that he was better off starting at the beginning.

"First step, get to the planet's surface," he said out loud, flipping his receiver to the guidance frequency, "That shouldn't be too tough. How many times have I done it when delivering a package? Plenty. Just breathe easy, stick to the old reliable methods, and everything will be fine."

"Hello, my name is Jeannette Morray, and I would like to welcome you to Verna Coronet," purred a voice over his radio.

Lex recognized the voice and name. She was a famous actress, the sort who demands enough money to build a stadium for fifteen minutes of screen time. The idea that VC had enough money to hire her for their holding pattern announcements managed to make him even more nervous. Briefly he wondered how much the small fleet of voice over artists who provided Ma's piecemeal voice charged. If any of them were still working, it might be nice to hire her to read the dictionary or something, to give Ma a more consistent

persona.

Verna Coronet Western Hemisphere Port Station came into view, a silver thread of a space station stretching impossibly far in all directions. As he drew closer, it began to resemble a long thin strip of metallic netting, the brilliant specks of starship engines slowly organizing themselves into orderly rows, creeping along like the tail lights of cars on an old fashioned freeway. Steadily the details of the station became visible, a deep framework of personways, narrow pressurized tubes leading to authorization stations that stuck like thorns out into space. Each station had its own line of ships. The network of tubes and stations must have continued for miles to the left and right, and was easily half a mile from top to bottom, and nearly as deep. It was a huge piece of fragile infrastructure, designed to efficiently monitor and record the entry and exit of every ship looking to access this half of the planet. The voice continued.

"Discovered and colonized in the early years of wide scale space exploration, Verna Coronet was developed quickly, one of the few planets to require almost no terraforming. It became an indispensable port of call for trade and transportation within years of its settlement. A small company that shared the planet's initials, then called The Vector Corporation, was founded to map and regulate local trade routes. Today, VectorCorp is responsible for more than seventy percent of all intersystem communication and transit. Verna Coronet remains the central headquarters of VectorCorp, which is now the only significant corporate presence on the planet. Please enjoy your stay, and await further instruction regarding your landing. Thank you. Current wait time is: Forty. Three. Minutes."

Lex swallowed hard. The preliminary festivities would be nearly over by the time he made it to the surface at this rate. He didn't know how long it was going to take to do what needed to be done, but he had a feeling that it would take longer than he expected. This was time he couldn't afford to lose. Unfortunately, knowing that didn't make things move any faster.

The minutes ticked by painfully slowly. To keep himself busy, he decided he would work on setting the record for world's fastest ulcer by watching patrol ships work their way systematically down the lines awaiting processing. They were checking everyone in a given line, starting at the front and sliding along quickly and efficiently. They weren't being thorough, just stopping briefly at each ship, long enough to take a quick look. They were checking faces. Sweat ran down his neck. He may have underestimated them. They were clearly looking for him, but there shouldn't be any reason for that. It wasn't like they knew his plan. It would have taken an idiot to come directly to their headquarters when the company wanted him dead. Were they really that smart, anticipating his moves so well? Or were they just that paranoid? At this point, they may as well be the same thing.

His heart started to pound. Plan A wasn't looking good, but it could still work if he made it through the check before the patrols started on his line.

Three more to go. Now two, now one.

"Hello, and welcome to Verna Coronet, corporate headquarters of VectorCorp. Please transmit your landing authorization," said an alarmingly chipper sounding young man over the com link.

"I'm sorry, I'm having transmitter problems," Lex said, trying desperately to avoid sounding as desperate as he was. It was a losing battle. "I'm going to have to ask for a vocal code submission."

"That will not be a problem sir. Will you please provide the five hundred and twelve digit alphanumeric landing code found on your authorization screen?"

"Wha-wha-" Lex stuttered, feeling for a moment as though the ground had been yanked from underneath him, "How many digits?"

"Five hundred and twelve. You can find them-"

"Oh, yeah, I know. It's just that, uh, most of the time people only ask for the last sixty-four."

"Mmm. Yes, that is a common shortcut, but I'm afraid standard policy calls for the full code. Also, if you would, please shift to the manual check-in queue to your left as you authorize, so that fully functional ships can continue through on the automated system."

Lex looked to the manual line. There wasn't a security ship waiting there. There didn't have to be. The line had its own security checkpoint. Plan A had officially failed.

"Sure thing, just a minute," said the pilot, mopping his head, "Do you mind if I ask your name, sir?"

"Not at all. I am Orbital Check-in Agent Lionel Sanders."

"Well, Lionel, I just want to congratulate you on doing an excellent job. This was a surprise security audit, and I'm pleased to say that you passed. I'll just get out of line and head back to the audit firm."

"Well, thank you very much, sir, but you are still in Verna Coronet orbital space, so I will need your official authorization, and if you don't mind, your audit license number as well, for our records."

"..."

"Sir?"

Lex punched a few buttons on his console, his engine beginning to rev and shudder. As he entered various codes and secret combinations, he spoke.

"I would like to apologize in advance for this." The engine was beginning to interfere with the radio now, a deep, throaty growl overlaying the transmission. "You're doing an excellent job, and I have nothing against you." Now the building power was beginning to produce an unsettling glow in his engine cowling. "Hopefully your superiors don't hold you responsible for what is about to happen."

"Sir, please power down your engine," Sanders said, trying to sound stern. A sizable dose of panic slipped through along with it, "There are security personnel en route. What exactly do you think you are going to do?"

“Plan B.” Lex said, cramming his mouth full of gum.

He punched the engine for all it was worth and activated the radio scrambling mode that Karter had installed. The result was immediate, swallowing the signal of everyone around him in a sea of distortion and white noise. With no way to coordinate, chaos reigned. Lex wove through the lanes of waiting ships, wringing every ounce of speed and agility out of the SOB. Behind him, at least a dozen security ships narrowly avoided colliding with each other as they chased after him. All around, screens and indicators began to light up, alerting the ships waiting to be processed that a police activity was occurring and directing them to clear the area through indicated routes.

A glance in his rear viewer assured him that the ships had wrangled themselves into a staggered line behind him, each trying with varying degrees of success to simultaneously get close to Lex and keep away from each other. While his ship was blacking out communications, though, it was virtually impossible. The thin metallic passageways that made up the space station whipped by with horrifying speed. With each one, Lex found himself both fearing and praying for one of his followers to smash into it. The goal here was to KEEP people from getting killed, after all. Was it acceptable if a few security guards and a few port workers got killed in the process of saving hundreds of thousands of other people? What was the moral balance? Lex probably wasn’t qualified to answer that question even when he had his full mind available to consider the issue. As SOB clipped a transmission array, knocking it loose to be dashed apart by the growing trail of pursuing ships, it became clear that philosophical debate should probably wait until he wasn’t running for his life.

The first wisps of atmosphere were beginning to whistle across this ship’s surface now. Wisely, the port of entry was geostationary over roughly the center of the largest of Verna Coronet’s oceans. The idea was that, if something went wrong, there probably wouldn’t be a city at the point of impact. This also meant that those ships behind him could open fire without worrying about hitting a skyscraper full of white collared executives. Sensors screamed warnings as Lex took evasive action. He twisted, bobbed, and twitched the ship, looping around volleys of plasma bolts and trying to aim roughly for the mainland.

It wasn’t just a matter of speed. In the atmosphere, wind resistance was already starting to heat up the hull of his ship, regardless of his shields. He couldn’t afford to push it any harder, and the well funded VC security force was equipped with ships that could easily match his current speed. This was going to be pure evasion, and it was only going to get more difficult, because the space station was out of range of his jamming, which meant that word was now reaching every available ship and hovercar to head to his position and take him down. The air was thick with hissing plasma shots, ships all carefully clustering on one side to be sure that they wouldn’t catch friendlies in the crossfire. Bolts splashed against his shield, but Lex kept on target,

making each dodge and sweep take him closer to the continent with the HQ.

More ships arrived, and formations and flanking maneuvers began to form regardless of the lack of communication. These guys were good, the best training money could buy. If he let them stay on him for much longer, no amount of fancy flying would get him out of this alive. Time to pull another ace out of his sleeve. He dipped down, sweeping into the thicker atmosphere. His hull started to glow with air friction, but he continued to push the limits of his ship, slowing only as much as necessary to keep from collapsing his shield entirely. The ships began to cluster behind him, opening fire freely now with only open water below. Shield integrity warnings blared at him. His protective force field was in the single digits and ticking steadily down as it was pelted with air molecules at supersonic speed. Finally the pursuit ships were gathered into a tiny slice of the sky, directly behind him, and near enough to make dodging their weapons fire nearly impossible. Now was the time.

He punched the button for the heat dumper, activating one of Karter's other countermeasures, an EMP burst, targeted to the rear. The electronics systems of the pursuit vessels lit up like a dozen slot machines, rogue electrons suddenly confusing signals and corrupting data streams. Controls were useless, along with weapons, communications, engine electronics, and basically anything else that used complex computations. Without continued thrust they quickly slowed to terminal velocity as gravity took over as the driving force. Lex pulled up and hissed along the surface of the ocean, scooping out a deep furrow in the water below and leaving an epic wake behind. The ships behind struck the water one by one, like a handful of gravel hurled into a well. Mechanical safety systems worked their magic with air bags, magnetic fields, impact foam, and all of the other hocus-pocus that engineers had managed to come up with to keep the human brain from becoming scrambled eggs during a high speed impact even when the computers were on the fritz. Water hissed to steam in contact with the hulls, men slowly came to their senses and tried to make sense of what had happened. When all was said and done, the nearly three dozen ships on Lex's tail had been reduced to three stragglers that were too far away to get the full brunt of the EMP.

They began to close in on their target. The shore was in sight now. Time was running out for them, so desperate measures were called for. The more vicious weapons began to come online. Missiles dropped into launch tubes, the heat signal of the invading ship identified and locked, and they were launched. Lex looked at a string of threatening white dots with rapidly decreasing range indicators as they closed in. A waggle of his stick and pivot of the ship shoved his shields momentarily below the surface of the sea, heaving a wall of water up behind him. The delicate warheads smacked into the water at many multiples of the speed of sound and detonated, but no sooner had they been dealt with than a new cluster were on their way, and there simply wasn't enough shield left to do a repeat performance.

The shore was close now, close enough for seagoing traffic to start flashing by. Huge tankers, little pleasure crafts, and a cruise ship or two came and went. Lives were in danger now. Innocent lives. Lex held his breath and gave the controls a shove. There was a flash of light, and a sound like a meteor tearing into the surface of the planet.

From behind, the three remaining ships watched as the missiles unleashed their payload amid a veritable geyser of water. When the surface settled, there was no sign of the ship they'd been after.

"Report! Report! Is the target eliminated?" a voice over the radio demanded.

"Weapon impact detected. Unable to confirm positive kill," came a reply, "Ship struck the ocean surface."

"Perform sensor sweep."

"Sensor sweep in process. Results inconclusive. We aren't getting anything sir, positive or negative. The water could be masking the signature."

"Continue with the deep scan. Get rescue vessels over to pick up the other ships. Full medical complement." With the crucial points covered, the mechanical following of protocol dropped away and the human reactions began to flow, "Who the hell is this guy? I've never seen anyone fly like that."

"With any luck, he's a corpse."

"We've got to get a planet-wide high alert. If that guy is a terrorist and he's not dead, everyone is going to need their eyes open."

"Agreed, but we're going to need to do this silently. As far as any of those press vultures are concerned, there was a minor disturbance in orbit, and the culprit has been handled. Now let's-"

Click.

Lex turned off his receiver. The sunlight was filtering weakly through the waves and painting the interior of the cockpit with marbled veins of light. An indicator on his screen informed him that silent running had been successfully activated. The internal heat shunts were masking his heat signature. His journey from supersonic speed to a few miles per hour hadn't been without consequence. The screen was warning of complete primary and secondary shield failure. That was enlightening, because he didn't know that he HAD a secondary shield. Two of the three anti-grav modules on the belly of the ship were no longer responding. Half a dozen subsystems were requesting a restart, and one of his fore lights was out. The hull integrity was one hundred percent, however, and thanks to the inertial dampener, his skeleton hadn't been turned to powder.

Keeping the ship in low power to extend the "sensor invisible" status for as long as possible, he guided the SOB along below the waves, heading toward the mainland. The one thing he had going for him was that the press conference was being held at their central offices, which were overlooking the ocean. As a matter of fact, the offices were notorious for actually overhanging

the bay in certain places. The company line was something about it being symbolic of their commitment to stretch the boundaries of what is possible. Lex thought it was more symbolic of the stupid things rich people will do to get media attention.

As he got closer to the shore, the quality of the second hand spy satellite sensor suite became apparent. Everything even remotely related to information gathering and exchange was showing up in sweeps. Slidepads, datapads, cameras, wireless access points, traffic lights, even old fashioned networked printers. He had to pick a spot to surface his ship and try to enter the VectorCorp complex, but he couldn't risk doing it somewhere where they would pick up on him. If he was going to have a chance of getting in, let alone getting back out, he was going to need most of the security attention to be focused on the spot off shore where they thought he'd been taken down. The miles and minutes ticked by as he searched for a quiet stretch of beach. When he found one, the VC tower was a barely visible, gleaming point on the horizon, and according to the clock, he had something like thirty-five minutes to get there before the big cheese got on the microphone. And he had to do it unseen. In a crowded city. During a convention. Or hundreds of thousands of people would die.

No pressure.

Chapter 23

The streets were crowded with both foot traffic and street traffic. It wasn't like Lon Djinn, where the city was used to that sort of thing and had adapted. This was clearly the rare and ill prepared for uptick in population that conventions invariably brought to an area. Verna Coronet was very earth-like. Across its five continents, every climate was represented, and the VC tower stood on the east coast, just a bit above the equator. The place was practically a vacation resort, with cool sea breeze blowing over a lush, green environment with palm trees imported from California and trendy restaurants and boutiques, also imported from California, lining every street. People were mostly hustling to make it to the tower to witness the VC CEO explain that his company, sure enough, still had more money than God, and such would remain the case for the foreseeable future. Sifting among the legion of designer labels and spray tans was a curious sight; an unshaven man in a flight suit, all of its pockets bulging, and a dull gray bundle strapped to his back. His face was smudged with irregular shaped black splotches, like a football player's warpaint if it had been applied on a roller coaster. He wore bizarre mitts on his hands, thick blue gloves. Despite the fact that he stuck out like a sore thumb, Lex didn't garner a second glance from anyone. As a matter of fact, he didn't even get a first glance.

He nervously twitched a knob on his backpack. Karter had managed to "ruggedize" the mental cloak, meaning that he'd given it a somewhat sturdier covering than its duct tape cocoon. He'd also thrown out an awful lot of amplification and power apparatus, knocking its range down to about two hundred meters and its weight down to about ten kilos. This, he claimed, would "probably" prevent it from causing seizures. The threat of sudden debilitating brain ailments managed to be the last thing on Lex's mind, though. Mostly he felt naked. The face paint was to foil facial detection and identification, and it seemed to be working. On the other hand, he was trusting a piece of machinery that was currently undergoing its first actual test, and operated on principles that he would have sworn were just made up, to keep him from being seen in broad daylight on a crowded street. He felt like the emperor wearing his fancy new clothes. Yet, astoundingly, it was working.

It wasn't like he was invisible. It was better. If he'd been invisible, he'd have had to worry about people constantly running into him. With this piece of technological witchcraft, people were actually stepping out of his way, making room for him as he jogged by. A half hour of moving unnoticed through the crowded streets had taken him to the outskirts of the VectorCorp Tower Plaza, but simply being ignored wasn't going to help him any more. The courtyard was utterly packed, shoulder to shoulder with nowhere to move. Most attendees were men in suits or women in business wear, gathered to witness a speech by their glorious leader. These people worked eighty hour weeks for this man, but squinting at a podium several hundred feet away on

the steps of the building, or on one of the pair of massive screens set up along the side of the tower, was likely the closest they would ever come to actually meeting him. By rights, the VectorCorp CEO should have been the most famous person in the galaxy, but this was one of those occasions where specific names just didn't matter anymore. VectorCorp was a force. You cared about as much about the man in charge as you cared about the name of the engineer operating the train you were riding, or in the case of Lex, of the train that was about to hit you. A parade of silver-haired men, or women who paid a small fortune to avoid being silver-haired, had held the post over the years, like different actors reprising the same role on a soap opera.

The rest of the crowd was made up of broadcasters of every type: Bloggers, Vloggers, business media, generic news, local, regional, galactic. It didn't matter what language you spoke or where you lived, over the next week, you were not going to be able to avoid seeing clips of this speech. It would be nice to think that all he had to do was de-cloak in the middle of the crowd and scream that VectorCorp was plotting to kill thousands of people, but that sort of thing happened every year or so, and press laughed it off as a harmless lunatic's rantings. Lex had, too. Now he wasn't so sure. But what he DID know was that he needed a better way, or at least better evidence, and that meant getting inside.

Between the promise of hearing their elusive boss speak and the promise of coverage of the hottest news event of the year so far, the crowd wasn't budging an inch. Having people not notice you when you were scooting by them was one thing. Shoving people aside would probably override any sort of pseudo-magical powers his backpack had. It was just as well. He hadn't expected to be able to walk through the front door anyway. He scanned the area, looking for a way in. The courtyard was definitely out, so he began to work his way around the fenced off speech area, looking for a door or window that wasn't actively being guarded. He'd just spotted an access door in a low wall around the yard, just forward of where it connected to the building, when he saw a contingent of security guards walking with purpose toward him. They were sweeping the area with their eyes, talking conspicuously into headsets. It wasn't hard to figure out what was going on. Someone manning the security monitors had spotted a suspicious idiot with face paint on near the cameras, and they'd been sent to intercept. Once they got close, though, the mental cloak kicked in and they couldn't spot anything that even remotely resembled what they were looking for. He held his breath and tried to think inconspicuous thoughts. They looked with increasing accuracy toward him, and in some cases directly at him, but only appeared more agitated. Lex sidled along the wall, near enough to hear the argument.

"I'm telling you, there's no one here! … I'm not an asshole, Don. If there was a painted up weirdo in this area, I THINK I'd see him. You sent us to the wrong area," growled the leader of the group, "… I'm looking right at the wall. Quit jerking me around. I'm heading to the other side. Let's go."

The security guards hurried off, the voice in their earpiece screaming loud enough for Lex to hear him as they passed. When they were out of sight, he exhaled and started rummaging through one of his suit's pouches. Finally he came up with... a finger. It was one of the fingers that Karter had blown off on the day Lex first met him, and was wired to a small control box with a handful of buttons on it and a screen. He tapped through the menu, seeing a sequence of names slide by that he didn't recognize, finally digging up "Agent Fisk." There actually hadn't been enough of his fingers left to get a good print, but they'd managed to find his gun and lift a set off of that, which was subsequently fed to the programmable fingerprints. He swiped the finger across the reader. Instantly the green "access granted" light flicked on. He opened the door, slipped inside, and shut it behind him.

The door had led to a shaded area tucked into the corner of the courtyard that was crammed with as many media rigs as they could fit. Logos of various sites, channels, and stations were plastered across equipment from every price range. A handful of the people present snapped their heads in his direction when the door opened and shut, furrowing their brows in confusion. From their point of view, someone had certainly come through the door, but just as certainly there wasn't anyone standing there. When they looked away, Lex's heart started to beat again. Yes, this ulcer was coming along nicely.

He moved as close to the wall as possible, reasoning that elbowing through the crowd wasn't going to get him any closer to the inside of the building anytime soon. Ma had actually managed to track down a building schematic, but said map neglected to take into account the triple capacity attendance of the speech, so he wouldn't even bother looking it over until he was inside. He'd barely managed to squeeze three layers deep into the press of press when the door opened again and three of the security crew slipped inside. Their appearance motivated him to sacrifice a little bit of care for speed. He edged, pushed, slipped, and nudged his way through the crowd of microphones, cameras, monopods, tripods, and agitated news casters and crew. His attempts to keep his eye on the pursuing security agents led to him stumbling backward as often as frontward. People griped, complained, and snapped at him when he bumped them, turning to look past Lex to the next closest person to blame. When it became clear that the commotion he was causing was attracting their attention even without being able to see him, he tried to restore a level of care to his footsteps. Unfortunately, panic doesn't get flipped off like a light switch, and it tends to keep its friend paranoia around for company. He turned around to see them, took a nervous step backward, and barely nudged yet another anchor.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said the young woman in reflexive politeness.

Lex froze at the sound of the voice. Those three words managed to force every ounce of fear, of duty, of THOUGHT from the would be infiltrator's mind. He turned, eyes wide, and beheld a beautiful young newscaster. Carefully styled and highlighted auburn hair framed a face he would

recognize anywhere. She'd brushed on makeup to hide her freckles, but even now she stared with striking blue eyes through a stylish pair of glasses, looking with disappointment at the obstructed view to the podium.

"We aren't going to see anything from here. I knew we should have gotten here earlier," she fretted, "Can you get a shot at all, Ted?"

"I doubt it. The transmission truck from NewsCom is blocking the way," said a squat older man, strapped with cameras, lenses, microphones, and everything else necessary to do a news report from the field. That was the funny thing about optics. The digital sensors had gotten better and better, smaller and smaller, but it never changed the fact that a bigger lens made for a better picture, so the real pros were still working with hefty equipment, "I've got the directional, so we can get some decent audio."

"Well, there's that. No offense, Ted, you do great work, but if we had brought one of those hovercam modules instead of you, we'd at least get an elevated shot."

"I've got a hovercam, but if we do that, this is going to be low res. You okay with that?"

As the two began to deliberate over how best to produce a report that probably would decide the direction of their careers for the decade to come, Lex just stared. Without his clumsy, desperate maneuvering though the press area, the security crew had lost track and moved on, but that was hardly his plan. Right now, staring was all he wanted to do. It wasn't until a squeal of feedback and a nervous business underling's voice announced that the speech would be starting in just a few minutes that Lex finally remembered he had a job to do. Quickly he realized that this impossible coincidence would eliminate one of the major question marks in the plan he and Ma had constructed. That is, if he could pull it off. It was an idiotic long shot, but at least that made it consistent with the rest of the plan. After shuffling against the wall, huddled between a stack of equipment cases and the support for a banner, and leaning against an intercom panel, he reached back and twisted the knob on his pack to zero.

"Mitch," he said quietly.

She glanced absentmindedly in is direction, "Mmm? I'm sorry, I'll be with you in a minute, I've got to- … Trevor?"

She twisted her head, struggling to grapple with his unlikely presence. A sequence of emotions flickered across her features, starting with surprise, then moving swiftly to confusion. For an all too brief moment, a smile came to her face, but the memory of her last conversation with Lex wiped it away, replacing it with suspicion and anger.

"What are you doing here? What is all of this?"

"Shh. Quietly. I have to talk to you, and I don't have much time."

Michella stepped closer, blocking anyone else's view of Lex's hiding place.

"What has been happening to you, Trevor? First the business with the

mobster, then that fiasco Tessera? The Lon Djinn Jumper?"

"I- You know that was me?"

"I'd recognize that stupid run of yours and your silly haircut anywhere. How did you get here without me seeing you?"

"You were distracted. What do you mean silly haircut? I haven't gotten my hair cut in months."

"That's what I mean. I don't have time for his now, Trevor. You seem fine with ruining YOUR life, but I've got a career to think about."

"Michella, I-"

"Do you have any idea how important it is that I make a good impression with this broadcast? This will be my first report that will part of the regional feeds."

"That's great, but-"

"It isn't much to work with, and we've got a terrible spot, but once my face is out there I'll have something to put in my portfolio, and I can-"

"Listen!" Lex hissed, as loud as he dared.

Michella flinched back as though she'd been slapped, shock on her face. Outrage began to creep in around her expression. Lex quickly filled the silence before she had a chance to scream her disapproval.

"I'm proud of you, I really am, and I'm sorry for everything that happened between us, but this isn't about you and me right now, okay? I can't go into the specifics, and you wouldn't believe me if I did, but something very big and very bad is about to go down, and if I don't stop it, then I'm never going to be able to live with myself, and other people aren't going to be able to live, period. I can't do it alone though, I need your help."

"You honestly think that I would risk helping you do anything after the things you've gotten yourself into in the past?"

Lex glanced nervously at a pair of guards who were working their way back toward him. Distantly he heard the one in charge tell his partner, who was having trouble with his communicator, to check in on intercom 100212. He turned. It was the one directly behind him.

"Mitch, please. If you've ever trusted me before, trust me when I say this. In a few minutes, whether I succeed or fail, you are going to have the biggest story of the century fall into your lap. You just need to do what you do best. Keep your ears open, keep your eyes open. I'll signal you, somehow. And if you never hear from me again, contact a planet called Big Sigma and talk to a person name Kart- ... A person named Ma. She'll tell you what you need to know."

"Trev, you aren't making any sense. How will I know the story when I see it?" she asked, concern fighting its way past her anger.

He glanced over her shoulder.

"You'll know," he said, leaning forward and kissing her, "You look amazing, by the way."

"Trevor, you can't just come here and say things like this-," she began,

turning to see what he'd been looking at.

He took the opportunity to switch the mental cloak on again.

"We haven't spoken since... Trevor?" she said when she turned back. She furrowed her brow and craned her neck, unconsciously trying to see around him in order to find out where he'd gone. He slipped away a moment before the security guard arrived.

"Excuse me, Ma'am. I'm sorry, I need to use this intercom," he said, "You haven't seen anything unusual, have you? A man with face paint and a backpack?"

Michella looked around once more, failing to see her cloaked ex-boyfriend edging toward a door further along the wall.

"No. No, nothing like that. Why, should I have?" she asked.

"I doubt it. I think the guys in the surveillance room are running a drill. They've got us running all over looking for-"

"Peterson. Don't talk to the press," his supervisor sternly instructed.

"I need a decision on this, Miss Modane," said her camera man.

Michella chewed her lip thoughtfully for a moment. She looked in a direction her mind vaguely indicated was a significant one, but saw nothing but an activated access panel near a security door.

"Go with the low res hovercam on the podium, close as you can, but keep the full def cam ready to go on me. And keep your eyes open, Ted. I think I just got the scoop of a lifetime."

Lex thumbed through a list of instructions that Karter and Ma had prepared for him, in the event he found an access panel. The Agent Fisk fingerprint should be enough to access his system account, with all of the associated privileges. That meant that he could deactivate any security that Fisk was in charge of. Based on his rank, that was probably everything. There were only two problems. One, he needed to enter every command correctly, or he would trip internal safeguards, and two, he had to be careful not to make too significant a security adjustment, or he would trip the same safeguards. If he had a low level computer background, this would be a breeze. As it was, the closest he came to system level computer experience was bringing up the cheat console in his favorite first person shooter.

Sweat was making his face paint run by the time he identified the OS and found the correct sequence of commands, keying them in one by one. Open security console, scan for authorization verification, select the systems he wanted to deactivate, send alert that the systems would be going down with administrator authorization, shut down, cross fingers. After a few moments he received a confirmation message. All scanners between this door and Fisk's office should now be deactivated with reason code "prisoner escort," and all doors between here and there should be fingerprint verification only. A warning scrolled up. *The following sensors cannot be deactivated, for safety reasons: Wireless spectrum activity detector.* That shouldn't be a problem, he

would just wait until he got back outside to use anything wireless. He logged out of the console, swiped the finger for the door, and slipped inside.

The door led to a narrow, bland corridor. All large corporate buildings had them. Little passageways, private elevators, and secret tunnels. Places for the janitors and caterers and other worker ants to do their jobs, out of the sight of clientele. Lex had become comfortable with places like these, since delivery boys were buzzed into the service doors when they arrived, and he was at least two different kinds of delivery boy. Little black blisters bulged from the ceiling every few feet, security cams. A conspicuous absence of blinking red lights proved that they were inactive. He walked nervously down the hall, glancing down at his downloaded schematic for directions along the way. It was quiet, the hall utterly empty except for the muffled clamor from outside the door. His footsteps echoed off of bare walls as he moved. Each wall was interspersed with metal doors with tiny windows made from the glass with a web of metal wire sandwiched inside, the kind you find in prisons and public schools. He made a handful of turns, finding himself in a labyrinth of identical halls. Without the schematic he would be hopelessly lost. Hell, he wasn't sure that he wasn't lost regardless.

Eventually he came to a worn blue line on the floor and a step-through, metal detector style doorway. A small placard explained in three languages that beyond this point full sensor sweeps were strictly enforced, ending with a list of prohibited items. The line was guarded by an alert security guard. She had a sidearm in a holster, and was clutching one of modern law enforcement's proudest achievements, a stun rod.

Engineers had looked at the problem of crowd pacification. They knew that less-than-lethal methods were a must, but things like pepper spray had too high of a tendency to incapacitate the officer as well as the target. Stun guns had proven effective, but were slow to deploy and required training to use effectively. Batons were simple to use, but lacked stopping power unless used aggressively, at which point the line between "incapacitated" and "persistent vegetative state" was a bit too easy to cross. Thus, the stun rod was born. The differences between it and a cattle prod were mostly academic, but the thinking was, if it worked on livestock, it would work on protesters. Internal circuitry calibrated the shock force at the moment of impact, ensuring that regardless if it was a drug crazed biker or a cantankerous grandmother, the jolt delivered was just over the required amount to put them out of commission. That was the idea anyway. In practice it was more like just under the amount necessary to stop their heart, but the results were the same. Lex had once seen the business end of one back in college when he got a bit too rowdy in a bar. He was in no rush to repeat the experience.

When the young lady on duty failed to notice him just as all of the others had, he slipped through the detector... and promptly heard a terrifying sound. The display screen beside the detector blipped and explained that a wireless signature had been detected. He dug frantically through his equipment,

ensuring his slidepad was powered off and that he hadn't mistakenly brought anything else with a transmitter, but still the warning flashed and a count down to a "general alert" had begun. The guard had taken notice, and sighed in irritation before checking her own slidepad and radio, only to find that they too were deactivated. She began to look around curiously, tapping the screen. There were seventeen seconds left. Slowly she raised her stun rod and clicked it on.

Lex patted every pocket, feeling for anything he might have overlooked, but it wasn't until his hand brushed the antenna of the backpack that he realized the truth. The mental cloak! Karter had said something about it transmitting on... psychic wavelengths or some such. It must be visible to the detector. He sprinted deeper into the complex, turned a corner and, with a handful of seconds left, desperately clicked it off. He held perfectly still, eyes shut and teeth clinched. Enough time had passed with no alarm. It had worked. A shaky sigh of relief escaped his lips and he moved carefully onward. The cameras were all off. He just had to avoid being seen the old fashioned way, that was all. A quick dig through one of his multitude of pockets unearthed a thin balaclava, the good old fashioned ski mask, staple of infiltrators and bank robbers everywhere. Ma had insisted that the face paint was all that was needed to disguise him, and that a full face mask could draw more attention, but Lex was occasionally a sucker for a cliche.

Behind him, the guard looked at the screen, now reading an all clear message. She'd been told there had been an incident in orbit. After that there had been a report of an intruder in the courtyard that no one had been able to spot. Then there was the unannounced admin override of the security in this very hallway, yet no admins had come through yet. Now this sensor malfunction. It all seemed a bit much for a series of coincidences. For the life of her she couldn't figure out what it could mean, but she didn't have to figure it out. That was above her pay grade. All she had to do was call it in. She pressed a button on the hardwired intercom.

"Dispatch? Do me a favor and shoot a message up to level 2. We might have a situation..."

Chapter 24

Lex had made his way forward, trying his best to tiptoe in boots while lugging a flight suit full of equipment and a now useless backpack. The hallway before the sensor gate had been dead quiet, but now there was conversation behind every door, and too often people paced down the hallway. A big event like this would probably have had the security area buzzing like a hive regardless, but from the snippets of conversation he was able to make out, his presence was shaking things up considerably. Ironically, the disturbance caused by the heightened alert level was keeping everyone too distracted to notice the source of the breech slipping by their doors.

"I'm telling you. They've got Mr. Trent on his way over here," fretted one security agent. From the anxiety in his voice, you would think that the devil himself was coming to visit.

It was slow going, so much so that he didn't even want to think about how far into his speech the CEO must be by now. He'd had to make a panicked leap for an alcove or side hallway more than once, but he managed to make it to the elevator indicated by the schematics without being seen. He reached for the button, but the elevator was already on the way, coming down from level seventy, according the panel. There wasn't a decent hiding spot to be had, and someone WOULD be getting off of this elevator.

What followed were simultaneously the longest and shortest fifteen seconds of Lex's life. He looked desperately for a handy crate to hide inside, or maybe one of the ubiquitous man-sized ventilation ducts that always seemed to show up in the movies. No such luck. He was forced to press himself against the recessed wall and hope for the best.

There was a tone, and the elevator doors slid open. Out stepped a man in his early fifties, hair graying at the temples, in a standard business suit, sans jacket. His tie was loosened, and his cuffs and top button undone. He had the same sort of generic businessman look as the cookie cutter CEOs, but there was a flustered and stressed look about him. Rather than marching down the hall, he stopped just outside the elevator door, blocking the way inside. Lex wasn't more than two feet away, flattened against the wall and plainly visible. At the moment, he seemed distracted by a datapad in hand.

"Agent Anders!" he called out.

"Yes sir, Mr. Trent!" called out the nervous voice from earlier, as footsteps began quickly marching down the hall toward the elevator.

The underling arrived to find his superior, Mr. Trent, alone in front of the elevator.

"Do you know anything about this admin override?" he growled, stabbing a finger at the datapad.

"It came in a few minutes ago. It looks like it was entered via an exterior access panel, under fingerprint authentication from Agent Fisk, sir."

"Fisk is back? Has anyone seen him?"

"Not yet, sir."

A bleeping sound drew their attention to the datapad. It was announcing that a wireless signature had been detected.

"That's the second time we've gotten that warning," Trent grimaced.

"Yes sir. I think there may be a problem with the monitoring systems. Our men in the surveillance room were reporting an intruder that the deployed agents could not locate."

"Do we have video?"

"Of course, sir."

"Show me. And run diagnostics. I can't be dealing with this right now. There is something very important I need to oversee," he said, striding toward a nearby door.

Behind him, the elevator door slid shut. He turned, glancing at it suspiciously.

Inside the elevator, Lex switched the mental cloak back off and slid down the wall to the ground. His heart was pounding out of his chest, sweat was beginning to soak his mask, and there was a nasty acidic taste in his mouth that didn't bode well for his gastrointestinal health. Fisk's office was on floor seventy. That should have translated into a long ride during which he could recover, but the elevator was modern enough to have a serious motor driving it, so the numbers rocketed by. It was not, however, modern enough to have an inertial inhibitor, so the acceleration kept Lex on the floor despite a few half-hearted attempts to stand. As it neared the floor it slowed, decelerating nearly quickly enough to make him leave the ground. He staggered to his feet, activated the mental cloak, and started the count to thirty in his head.

The doors slid open to a floor very different from the one he'd left behind. The institutional hallway was replaced with something that one would expect to see in an upscale law firm. Black marble floors, modern filing cabinets, and, unfortunately, a secretary behind a clerical desk. Lex rushed quickly to the hallway behind her, noting as he passed numerous rooms that looked like fancier versions of "waiting room six" back on Operlo. With about ten seconds to go, he turned a corner to a smaller hallway, out of the view of the secretary. With the exception of a pair of potted ferns there wasn't a living thing to be seen, so he deactivated the cloak.

Running parallel with the main hall, this smaller area had only three doors. One was facing the primary hall and elevator, and had the name plate *Security Chief William Trent*. At a dead end on the right was the *Secondary Records Room*, and at the end of the dead end to the left was his destination, a door label *Senior Agent Emanuel Fisk: Asset Protection and Loss Prevention Specialist.* He swiped the finger across the door and slipped inside.

The office wasn't precisely what he'd expected from the dead man, but it was close. There were guns of various sorts mounted on the walls, ranging from top of the line energy weapons to what looked to be a wood and steel

lever-action rifle that must have cost a bundle. There was a monitor showing muted video of the still in progress speech from the CEO, probably via an intraoffice feed. He had pictures of himself being decorated for various achievements, a disturbing number of pictures of horses, and a glass bowl filled with taffy. It made Lex slightly uncomfortable to see the human side of the man whom he'd been so relieved to see killed. The compassion was wiped away when he noticed eleven very conspicuous notches carved into the edge of the wood trim of his desk. This was a man who had not only killed people, but was proud of it.

He couldn't afford to delay any longer. In the center of the desk was a cutting edge datapad, a touch surface inset into the surface of the desk in place of what in days of old would have been a mouse and keyboard. Lex swiped the finger across the surface, activating the terminal, and began to enter in the commands that Ma had listed for him. At least, he tried to. Three attempted gestures were met with disappointing beeps before he noticed that it was informing him of "unauthorized access attempts."

"What the hell?" He groaned.

A swipe of the finger he'd used to log in, however, was accepted as input.

"It reads his prints for every input?!" Lex hissed under his breath.

The freelancer's already slow data entry skills were reduced to a snail's pace as he was forced to drag and tap with the purloined print, but one by one the commands were entered. A full graphical environment gave way to a white letters on a black screen. Drives were located and mounted. Directories were listed and navigated, and finally, a deep file search for the word "Gemini" was initiated. Three dots began to flick on and off in sequence as the search dug through exabytes of data. At irregular intervals a file name would pop up, but invariably it dealt with the astrological sign, or a model of car, or the constellation and the planets surrounding its stars. Fear-sweat trickled down from beneath Lex's mask, trickling along his eyelids and dripping from his lashes.

Many floors below, in the main surveillance room, Chief Trent gazed furiously at footage of his men failing to see a strangely dressed man with his face painted like a rock star that was standing right in front of them. In a tribute to Ma's foresight and Karter's resourcefulness, an IR scattering substance had been mixed into the paint as well, reflecting light into the lens and making him look like his face had been replaced with a sparkler. Identification was impossible.

"Explain to me..." he began, quietly, before raising his voice to a scream, "EXPLAIN TO ME! What you are showing me simply isn't possible. There is no way that a single one of my security agents could be so incompetent as to miss this man, let alone an entire squad. And where the hell is Fisk!? He is supposed to report directly to me when he returns from assignment!"

"He may be in his office, sir," shakily offered Anders, one of the unlucky

men who had never had any aspirations of leadership or power, yet had ended up as one of Trent's go-to answer men thanks to the horrible mistake of doing his job well, "There have been a large number of file accesses from his terminal."

"Bring up the cameras in his office."

"I can't sir. He disabled them and I don't have access."

Trent growled, shoving the lower level agent out of the way and logging in with his own credentials - that is to say, with his fingers. The cameras and other low level scanners were reactivated, but the alarms were suppressed. In the office was a man in a mask staring anxiously at the datapad screen. Lex, who was about four inches shorter and thirty pounds of muscle lighter than Fisk, could in no way be confused for the owner of the office.

"I'll raise the alarm!" Anders piped, reaching for a second console.

"No, you idiot," scolded his superior, "Not with those news crews outside. And that man is in a very sensitive area. If he gets desperate, he could cause serious damage. We are keeping this quiet."

He tapped at the console, a screen with his secretary's face popping up a moment later.

"Yes, Mr. Trent?" she replied.

"Did you see anyone come through and enter Agent Fisk's office?" he asked sternly.

"No, sir."

He pounded the desk with his fist, then forced himself to calm.

"Listen carefully. I want you to stand up, get onto the elevator, and go to floor sixty-five or lower. I am locking down our offices and everything else for five floors in either direction for a high level security exercise that you are not cleared to witness."

"Yes sir, Mr. Trent."

He ended the call and turned to Anders.

"I want six men, armed, at the service elevator in thirty seconds. As soon as my secretary is out of range, do a 10 floor lockdown on all doors and windows, centered on Fisk's office. No one but me gets access. Understand?" dictated the security chief.

"Yes sir," Anders quickly answered, tapping at the console and shouting orders of his own as Trent marched toward the elevator.

Back in Fisk's office, the search was far from over, but it had turned up as near to a hit as Lex was likely to get, a protected directory labeled "Bypass Gemini." He issued a few commands intended to alter permissions and give him access, but it was locked by the Chief of Security himself. If he wanted to read the contents, he would need to do it with Trent's credentials. Since he didn't have Trent's credentials, the only outside chance he had was if Fisk's prints would work on Trent's door, and his console. Ma had indicated that permissions could be associated with certain machines, so logging in on

Trent's machine might be enough to read the file.

He opened the door and tiptoed to the edge of the hall. From the sound of it, the elevator doors were just shutting, moving swiftly downward. He hazarded a peek and found that the secretary had left. Quickly he rushed to the door lock for Trent's office and tried the finger. The panel buzzed a harsh denial. A moment later its display turned red, black letters scrolling the message "Administrator Level Lockout Engaged." He turned desperately around to see each other door flick to red and display the same message. The finger wasn't doing any good now, not even unlocking Fisk's own door.

"No! No, no, no," Lex gibbered mindlessly, fumbling the finger's control box in his hands, "Need a new fingerprint. Need Trent's fingerprint."

Karter had included the ability to scan new fingerprints when he whipped up the control box, but it wasn't as though Lex was going to run into a labeled example of the security chief's thumbprint. He flipped through the menu and put it in scan mode. A violet band of light erupted from the end, the screen reading "Sweep over surface." He swept over the lock panel, the light painting a three inch wide, laser thin line like a supermarket scanner. A streaked print lit up fluorescent yellow under the beam, but it was too smudged to read. No other nearby surface seemed able to hold a print either, except the floor, but Trent hadn't had the decency to do any hand stands lately, it seems. He glanced back to the elevator. It was on its way up.

Running out of options, Lex's eyes snapped to a trash can near the door. He kicked it over and rummaged through. Napkins, ketchup packets, candy wrappers, and half eaten fast food went splattering across the hallway as he rummaged through. Finally he turned up a plastic coffee cup.

"Please please please please," he muttered, awkwardly twisting the piece of garbage beneath the scanner. It registered four clear prints.

Once they were accepted, he selected one and loaded it onto the fingertip.

"Come on, come on, come on!" He pleaded, as he swiped it.

Access Granted scrolled across the panel. He triumphantly slipped inside. There was nothing surprising about this office. It wasn't one room, but a suite. Doors led to a small conference room, a private bath, and a study. First was a small waiting room, followed by another secured door that led to his primary office, bearing a desk equipped with an even higher end computer and its assorted peripherals, including a high resolution, positionable camera and a personal fabricator. Shelves and counters proudly displayed the ugly, angular acrylic or chrome trophies that business types give each other for doing a good job. Beside the door was a fully stocked golf bag with clubs composed of exotic polymers and alloys. The walls were completely hidden. Much of the obscuring material was in the form of press clippings. Every conceivable format, from full motion video-paper displays with looping footage to old fashioned dead tree newspaper clippings, showed him receiving medals, making announcements, and shaking hands with big wigs. There were doors that led to a small conference room, a private bath, and a study. The rest of the

wall space was devoted to display screens. Many showed the CEO's speech as it was being covered through various media outlets, the volume low but audible. The rest showed random silent security feeds... including one showing himself, in real time.

His head whipped up to the source of the footage with near whiplash inducing speed to see a red light flashing.

"I turned those off!" he objected, as though reality had made a mistake and would straighten itself out after he revealed he'd caught on.

When the cosmos refused to oblige, his eyes jumped across the remaining monitors and spotted a feed from inside the elevator, showing the boss and a contingent of guards crammed inside. He heard the doors ding as he saw them open on the video. In a panicked frenzy he grabbed a handful of the golf clubs and rammed them through the handles of the door, then dove for the computer and got to work.

There's nothing like the fear of impending incarceration and/or demise to motivate you to improve your typing skills in a hurry. The programmed finger jabbed out the file location and opened it in a viewer. It was gigs of data. Images, videos, simulations, schematics. There were timetables and cost benefit analyses. Evidence that they knew exactly what they were doing, exactly the damage they would cause and the lives they would take, and they were going through with it anyway. He hooked his slidepad to the computer and quickly downloaded the data as he watched them burst into Fisk's office on the cameras. A half second later, the outer office door was hurled open and the inner one rattled against the makeshift brace.

"How the HELL did he get into my office?" growled a voice from outside the door, "You. You. Take this door down."

The office door began to rock with well coordinated kicks, making Lex glad that Trent had sprung for the solid wood door and titanium shaft clubs. Since there was no sense sneaking around anymore, he flipped on the data connection when the files had transferred and tried to send the info to Michella. It wouldn't connect. He poked the finger at the input panel, attempting to open an external channel, but received an error. The door was creaking more with each blow.

"God dammit! COME ON!" he growled, pounding at the machine.

Finally the door flew open and the security men rushed in. He tapped in a few last commands before the guards grabbed him, and even then he refused to give up, grabbing at the desk while they hauled him away.

"You two, hold him. You four, guard the door. Everyone away from the computer. No telling what sort of records he has open," Trent barked, his troops quickly complying.

With one guard holding each arm and standing him in front of the desk, Trent sized him up. In one hand was the slidepad. In the other was the programmable finger, its control box dangling. The security chief had a grin on his face.

“Well, well, well. You certainly have made it further than anyone else, I can tell you that,” he had a smug, victorious grin on his face, “Let’s see just how far you got.”

He snatched the slidepad from Lex’s hand and glanced at the unsent message. The smile slid to a sneer. His eyes narrowed in fury as he looked back to his prisoner.

“Gun,” he ordered simply, holding out his free hand. One of the guards handed him a sidearm, a standard issue, ballistic pistol with an extended magazine.

For a moment, Lex was certain that Trent was going to execute him where he stood. Instead, he spoke again.

“I want you to listen to me carefully. I am fully trained in the use of this weapon, not that I would need to be at this range. I don’t care how fast you fancy your reflexes to be, but there is nothing you could possibly do to me that could keep me from pulling the trigger. So if you try anything, ANYTHING, the contents of your head will be decorating the wall behind you. Do you understand?”

Lex nodded.

“Good. In a moment I am going to dismiss my men to the door, and you are going to answer some questions. After that, we’ll go over what you used to get this far, and after that... well, after that it doesn’t really matter what happens. When they release your arms, I want you to keep them raised and hold perfectly still. Do you understand that?”

He nodded again.

“Good. Men, go join the others, in the hall. There are classified matters to discuss. I’ll call you when I need you.”

The guards obeyed, closing the still intact outer door.

“How did you find out about Bypass Gemini? Are you the courier?”

“Maybe.”

Trent pulled the trigger. With a soft, silenced chirp a bullet shattered the finger Karter had given him. Half an inch lower and it would have cost him one of the ones his mother had given him instead.

“At what point did I indicate I was willing to play games?”

“Yes, I’m the courier.”

“I’d ask you what you know, but from the looks of that pad, the answer is ‘everything.’ That is unacceptable. Fortunately I don’t have to ask who else knows, because if you came here, you didn’t have any proof before, and you certainly didn’t get any data out of here.”

“How do you know?”

“Because it isn’t possible. This is the security wing of the largest company in the galaxy, courier. What did you think you could accomplish? Did you think you could just email classified files? It doesn’t work that way. Information does not leave these offices. Wireless connections must be whitelisted, like mine. The data network is physically isolated from the wide

area network. None of the hard line communication devices are hooked up to outside lines. Once you step into our complex, you can't even check the weather without code word clearance. This is nothing short of a vault. If you didn't leave, neither did any data. What made you think you could do anything about Bypass Gemini?"

Lex shuffled a half step to the right.

"I didn't think I could, but I had to try. The second you activate those arrays, you doom three hundred thousand people."

"Three hundred thousand," he scoffed, "Our estimates are closer to a half million. Believe me. We ran the numbers. There were other candidate stars. Only two sets fit the time frame we were looking for. One would have taken out six billion, the other half a million."

"Oh, so you're a regular philanthropist. I bet from your point of view you saved billions of lives rather than taking thousands of them," Lex jabbed. He probably should have been groveling for his life, but why delude himself? It was over now. There was no coming out of this alive. It was oddly liberating, in a way.

"Half a million people is nothing, courier. This is business. We are the reason society exists at ALL. You realize that, don't you? Good God, how many people on the outskirts of the galaxy would die of disease, or hunger, or thirst if we didn't keep trade lines open. How many would have even MADE it to the outskirts? Without VectorCorp, humanity would be a frightened, fragile bundle of tribes squatting in a handful of star systems, fighting overcrowding and without a whisper of contact with each other. VectorCorp exists because it has to, and if a few hundred thousand generic nobodies have to give their lives to make this corporation stronger, then that is a small price to pay. What makes us stronger makes humanity stronger. Look at the big picture. When we collapse those stars, we lose a few backwater planets, but we gain a thoroughfare that will change the shape of business, science, and exploration for centuries. Faster communication. Faster commerce. Faster troop movement... and if you knew half of what I know, you'd understand why getting troops across the galaxy is going to be very important, very soon."

"You could have at least evacuated the planets."

"Have you ever organized a wide scale evacuation? It takes years. They say that time is money, but that isn't the case. Time is so much more valuable than money. We needed faster motion, and an evacuation would have closed our window for at least 33 years. Unacceptable. But enough. I want to know everything. How did you get past my men? How did you access my systems?"

"Maybe I don't feel like telling you."

"What did I say about playing games, courier?"

"Buddy, if this is a game, you just lost," Lex said, looking over the man's shoulder.

"You think I'm stupid enough to..." Trent began, but he stopped as he

heard a strange sound, like an echo.

The sound was enough to make him turn. Lex took the moment's distraction to tackle Trent to the ground. Rather than continuing to struggle and risk getting shot, he tore the slidepad away from him and bolted for the conference room, slamming the door and throwing himself to the ground as a few angry shots perforated the wall.

Outside, Trent struggled to his feet and stared, eyes wide, at the wall. One by one the pictures were cutting away from the CEO, and switching instead to a slightly distorted image of himself, from behind. He turned to his computer. The camera was facing him. He sprinted to the screen to find that a video call had been opened to an intercom number, 100212. Mashing the touch pad to end the call, he turned back to the screens. A camera pulled away from the now black screen and focused instead on a shaken but steadfast woman.

"What you've just seen was a live feed from within the office of VectorCorp Security Chief William Trent. While the details are not yet clear, he appears to have admitted to a plan by this massive firm to knowingly endanger the lives of as many as half a million people. The identity of the other man in the office with him is not yet known, but authorities are at this moment being summoned to end what appears to be a deadly stand-off. One can only hope that this man, whoever he is, remains safe, because if the allegations are true, he may well be responsible for saving literally thousands of lives. A true hero," she said, her voice wavering slightly, the concern showing through her professional persona for just an instant,"For GolanaNet News, I'm Michella Modane. Stay with us for continuing coverage as this story develops."

With a roar of fury, Trent emptied the weapon into the wall of the conference room. Lex was flat against the floor, the bullets peppering and eventually shattering the highrise window over him.

"In here, now!" Trent barked into his communicator.

The main door burst open and all six guards rushed in.

"He's in there. If he's still alive, drag him out. I want him to see this," he ordered, working at something on his own slidepad.

In seconds they had broken the door, seized the unarmed courier and were hauling him back into the office.

"This guy weighs a ton," one of them grunted, struggling with Lex's lanky frame despite the fact that he seemed to be actively resisting only with his legs.

"Congratulations," Trent raved, insanity in his eyes, "You won the battle, I suppose. That broadcast is out. Nothing I can do about it. I could cut it off, but every nearby planet is getting it as we speak. A sudden cut or communication blackout would only make it seem more deliberate. But mass media is medium priority on our transmission lines, standard FTL forwarding schedule. It won't get to Operlo or ADC-29R45 for at least three minutes. Security protocol is maximum priority. Near zero delay."

He traced a gesture on his pad and the screens in the office changed to a status screen. One by one, lines completed.

Array Activation command transmission... Successful.

"No!" cried Lex.

"Yes, courier. Command sent. Non-retrievable. There is nothing that you or anyone else can do. I may go down. My company may get a black eye, but you can't. Stop. Progress."

ADC-29R45 Array Activation... Successful.

Operlo Array Activation... Pending.

All eyes remained locked on the final word, blinking slowly, text written in yellow. The fate of two stars and all of the life they supported hung upon one little yellow word. An insane smile stretched Trent's face. A look of horror grasped Lex. Finally, the word blinked away one last time, and the line updated.

Operlo Array Activation... Refused.

"What!?" he cried, clawing at his slidepad.

A security line was opened to Operlo, where it was answered by a familiar voice.

"Patel Construction. Miss Misra speaking," she said professionally.

"You have received a command to activate Project Gemini. Activate it now," he hissed.

"Oh, I'm sorry Mr. Trent. We are regrettably going to have to delay that request for approximately one hour. You see, we weren't anticipating the activation notice for several days, and we recently have been given cause to believe there may be a safety issue."

"You listen to me. You will activate that array NOW, or any contracts you have made with VC are void! Do you understand me!?"

"Mr. Trent, I'm sure you know that a contract is a rather binding document. Even asking me to activate ahead of schedule was intended to be a negotiated alteration. We are willing to forgo that formality, but safety must come first. We managed to complete the full array ahead of schedule, as requested. An hour of time should be of little concern. Please call back at that time."

Trent turned to Lex, now struggling madly with his whole body, a guard's hand over his mouth.

"You! You did this somehow! Kill him!" Trent ordered.

Before he could finish the command, Lex clenched his fist and struggled against one of his captors with all of his might. That would usually have had little effect on the massive guard who was restraining him. Then again, Lex wasn't usually wearing a pair of Karter's gloves. He'd activated them just before the guards had grabbed him, and their struggles to drag him out of his hiding place had managed to give them plenty of charge. His right fist continued forward, pivoting his body into an awkward, thrusting pirouette. The sudden and intense surge of motion nearly ripped his arm out of its

socket, but managed to shake both of the men restraining him. One was launched against a wall, his weapons clattering to the ground. The other was sent flying toward Trent and the other guards, colliding and sending the entire group crumbling into a pile, save for a pair who managed to dive aside.

Now would have been an excellent time to escape, but unfortunately the incomplete prototype needed to recharge. Any attempts to deactivate it produced an error tone, and the now rigid cloth would not release his hand. If Lex survived this, he was going to have to remember to tell Karter to fix that. He was left struggling with a hand that moved slowly though the air despite his best effort, as though he was dragging an invisible dumpster. The two guards who had escaped their ballistic colleague were getting to their feet, guns having slid to an unknown corner of the room. Lex scrambled his feet against the floor, reaching for the stun rod of the fallen agent. The slowly charging glove slid through the air a bit faster, his other hand's grasping fingers creeping closer to the rod. Finally he snatched it from the ground and swung wildly, connecting with the knee of the first guard. He convulsed briefly and fell to the ground. Lex swung around, as though his immobilized hand was clutching a pole, and delivered a jolt to the second guard, prompting the same response.

The glove finished charging enough to be movable a moment later, and he surveyed his options. He probably couldn't take out all four of the remaining guards, and even if he could, the doors were all locked and the finger was destroyed. Michella had said that authorities had been contacted, but even assuming the local law enforcement wasn't under the thumb of VC, which was a long shot, Trent was obviously insane enough for a stand off, and they were on the seventieth floor of a veritable fortress. A breath of wind rushed in behind him. He turned.

"I can't believe I'm about to do this again..." he moaned, dashing into the conference room and, before he could think long enough to talk himself out of it, hurling himself out the window.

The plan, what little of it there was, had been to dive into the bay. As the wind whipped past him on the way down, some key flaws began to reveal themselves. First, it struck him that a seventy story drop into the water might not be survivable. Second, that possibility may at this point be moot. Parts of the complex, it was previously stated, were directly overhanging the bay. This, it turns out, wasn't quite one of those sections. There was a short outcrop of land, about a dozen feet, that looked like it was about to become his final destination.

While his brain queued up the customary "life flashing before the eyes," an idea came to him. Again he cocked his fist, and again he punched at nothing, this time up and away. The device dumped its freshly recharged kinetic capacitors into an upward motion that canceled out a good deal of his downward momentum. As viewed from the outside, it would have looked like a perfect Shoryuken, except for all of the screaming and popping of joints.

When it was through, the emptied capacitors slowed his fall to a drifting crawl as they hungrily drank in his inertia. For a few moments he was drifting slowly toward the ground with one fist raised, like a cartoon character holding a balloon.

The fall and dragon punch had taken him about half of the way down, and nearly over the water, but he was already accelerating again. Lex considered a repeat performance, but his very nearly dislocated right arm decided that it was time to give the left a try. He waited until he was in free fall again; the thought of what would happen to him if he fired off a punch with his left hand before his right was ready to move at full speed again was almost as scary as the thought of hitting the ground. When the time seemed right, he hurled a left hook that yanked him a good thirty feet toward the ocean, then slowed to a steady downward drift as it recharged, his body dangling below. He splashed down shortly after the gloves fully recharged... and immediately realized a final flaw in his plan, in the form of the ten kilo pack strapped very securely to his back.

He fumbled with the straps, but between the gloves, the murky water, and the hand-shaking adrenaline levels, he couldn't manage the buckles. Finally he managed to snag the tag of a safety feature of most modern flight suits that pilots tended to scoff at, right up until they are forced to make a water landing. A quick tug inflated a pair of panels along the upper chest of his suit, dragging him back to the surface to take a much needed sputtering breath. The life vest patches were squeezed under the straps for the pack, crushing at shoulders that were already starting to swell after their sudden introduction to technologically enhanced martial arts. He managed to awkwardly snag his slidepad, which was fortunately waterproof (more or less) and punched in a few commands. He was evidently outside the wireless jamming window, because the transmission went through. A few minutes later, just as the people within the tower were beginning to gather at the windows to confirm that someone had indeed just gone past the window downwards, his ride arrived. Rising from below him, like some sort of sea turtle from the days of legend, came Son of Betsy. He popped the hatch, plopped wetly into the seat, and took it skyward. He pulled an emergency hammer from the compartment within the cockpit and punctured the floatation patches, strapped himself into the chair, and breathed a sigh of relief. The breath hadn't even finished leaving his lungs when the ship's sensors alerted him to approaching security vessels. He gritted his teeth.

"Sorry boys. I'm through playing," he growled.

Pointing his ship straight up, he pushed the thrusters to the maximum speed he could manage without completely incinerating the hull. The ships fell into pursuit, unable to do anything but match speed and fire their weapons. He drifted smoothly left and right, up and down, evading the ordinance like they were hardly a concern. As their altitude increased, he slowly ticked the power level up, gaining speed. The more daring of the

pursuit ships followed his lead. SOB's nose was incandescent now, fire dancing around the shock front ahead of his shield, but he didn't slow. His face was a mask of determination. He was going home, and his ship was going to hold together, because he was Trevor Alexander, and flying fast, steady, and true was what he did. That was all there was to it.

As they got into deep space, he continued to dial up the speed, pushing the engines up to one hundred percent, then further. One ten. One twenty. One fifty. One seventy. The points on his sensors slowly dropped away, unwilling or unable to keep up with him. When the coast was clear, he plotted a course and switched to FTL, not slowing to let the engine cool until he was halfway to his first destination. SOB didn't seem to mind.

Epilogue

"What'll it be, T?" asked the cook.

"The usual, Marv, and call me Lex, would you?"

"You look like hell."

"I've been hanging out there for the last couple of weeks."

"Smells like it."

Lex had taken his time coming back to Golana. It wasn't that he wasn't eager to come back. It is just that spending a month terrified that someone is chasing you had a way of making you hesitant to lead them to places you are fond of. So instead he had been puttering around in his ship, flying in random loops and jukes until the MTE rations Ma had given him ran out. He left his slidepad off, watched his back constantly, and generally lived as though the government, a corporate syndicate, or the mob were after him, mostly because they probably were. Eventually, though, he decided that if they were going to find him, they might as well get it over with. There is only so long that a human being can stand washing with moist towelettes or in the no-tell motels of the cosmos.

A bowl of chili and a bag of corn chips were placed before him, and he shoveled them down with more enthusiasm than any meal he'd eaten in a long time.

"You gonna pay me? Or is this the beginning of a new tab?" Marv asked.

"Here," he said, tossing the last chip of his advance on the table, "Keep it. You know something, Marv?"

"I know lots of things, T."

"It is good to be alive," Lex said, ignoring the quip and the stubborn refusal to adapt to his new nickname, "I'm heading home now, Marv."

"I don't see your bike anywhere."

"I figure I'll walk. I'm through flying for a few days."

"Got some messages for you here."

"Hang onto them. If I come back tomorrow, I'll worry about them then."

With that, he headed off for home. It was a long way, over sixty miles. Longer than he could realistically walk, but he spent as much of the time on foot as he could. He flipped the slidepad wireless on and began to sort though the messages he'd been too scared to look at before. Spam and the like were trashed. He had seventeen angry messages from his landlady, but hadn't gotten one for the last three days. His boss at the livery garage left a sequence of messages in which he fired him and rehired him at least three times. He always was the most requested driver over there. The courier boss wasn't quite so fickle, and had only gone so far as to warn that he was supposed to request sabbaticals, not just take them. Detective Barsky had left a few more vague warnings, threats that seemed almost quaint in comparison to what he'd been having to deal with.

Karter had sent him a pile of feedback forms to fill out regarding the

performance of the various gadgets, a task which he managed to do while riding a mag-lev train until they kicked him off for not having a ticket. Ma had sent him a separate message with contact information. She was new to the idea of casual conversation, it seemed, since she'd included a numbered list of possible topics of discussion for him to choose. Evidently multiple choice was the AI equivalent of small talk. He sorted through the remaining messages, the sort of random debris that accumulates in your inbox that isn't interesting enough to read but too useful to trash. Lots of things from lots of people. Nothing from Michella.

Next he poured through the news, half expecting to see his face and name plastered all over everything. Instead, he was practically absent. Here and there was a mention of "rumors of a masked stranger" or "an attempted suicide from the VC tower," but little else. Not even a blurry picture of him wearing his fancy balaclava. There was plenty to read, watch, and hear in reference to his antics, though. William Trent was currently in custody, pending an investigation into his involvement and actions regarding the "Weaponized Wormhole" as the press had taken to calling it. Lex had managed to deliver the stolen file to Michella via a random computer terminal in a library on a planet he'd never been to before and never intended to go again. She'd put it to good use, picking names and places, finding people to interview. She spoke to residents of Operlo and ADC. Her name was everywhere, and her investigative skills told more of the story than the criminal investigation probably would ever have turned up. It had gotten her much praise, and caught the eye of some of the more prestigious journals and broadcast outlets. Police and press alike had asked where she'd gotten her information, but she only ever cited a "trusted source who wisely wishes to remain anonymous." Finally he'd reached his door.

"Okay, let's see. I was a half a month behind in my rent when I left. How long ago was that?" he muttered to himself, reflecting on what seemed like several lifetimes of events, "At least a month. So I'm a month and a half behind. That's two decent paychecks, probably. So I'm going to be homeless for at least two weeks."

He tapped the intercom.

"Mrs. Dunne," he said, continuing as it negotiated a connection, "Hopefully I can convince her to let me get some of my clothes. Maybe I can get her to take my flatscreen in lieu of rent."

The screen timed out with an error.

"What the hell," he said with a shrug. In an act of blind optimism, decided to give his slidepad a try. He waved it across the door. It opened.

"What the hell?" he remarked, now in surprise, as he stepped inside.

He made his way to his apartment, and sure enough, his slidepad opened its door as well.

"What the HELL?!" he repeated upon seeing his home for the first time since this mess had begun.

It was clean. Not cleaned out, as in robbed, but cleaned up. Takeout boxes were removed, floors were mopped. His tiny little home was downright presentable. As he was admiring it, the clicking footsteps of high heels startled him. He looked up to see a statuesque, dark skinned goddess in a perfectly tailored business dress walk out of his bathroom.

"Welcome home, Mr. Alexander. You are late," said Miss Misra, "I hope you don't mind that I had the place straightened up."

"Wha- What are you doing here?"

"I received your message," she said, withdrawing a very lucky printout from its hiding place in her blouse pocket, "Let's see now. 'To: Miss Misra. From: That sunburned ass. Re: A word of warning. Dear Miss Misra, The password is where you had to touch up my skin cream.'" She grinned at him, tapping her left ear, "The contents of the attachment simply read, 'Don't let them activate it. Everyone will die.'"

"I can't believe you believed me," he said, "I sent one to some random guy at that asteroid, but I don't think he figured out the riddle I used for the password. Or he just thought I was a weirdo."

"A short delay seemed like a reasonable precaution. Mr. Patel was extremely grateful. He ruminated for a time on how best to illustrate his appreciation. Let me begin by saying that any disrespect you may have shown him through your past words or actions has been thoroughly forgiven."

"Well, that's nice."

"Nice, perhaps, but in his eyes and mine, insufficient. We reasoned that your actions may have put you in a rather precarious position with VectorCorp, as well as being the source of considerable publicity that would make your life... difficult. Suppressing unwanted media attention and smoothing corporate and legal tensions are something of an essential skill in our field, so we set about wiping your slate, as it were."

"So that's why I'm not running for my life anymore and staring at my face on every news report."

"Yes and no. It turned out there was little for us to do. Something to do with the Security Chief acting alone, and playing his cards quite close to his chest. We tugged a few strings to see to it that you were left alone by some of the stragglers, but it still seemed an inadequate showing of our gratitude, so we looked into your life, and found that you had been evicted."

"Yeah..." he said, the direction of the conversation making him nervous.

"Well, Uncle had been toying with the idea of expanding his real estate holdings for some time now, so he purchased your building. Mrs. Dunne, it seems, was happy to be rid of it. I came here to oversee the transition. Things were only finalized yesterday."

"Diamond Nick Patel is my landlord now?"

"He thought it would be an excellent way to keep in touch with you, on those occasions when he is in need of the services of a reliable and skilled pilot. The apartment is yours to live in, rent free, for as long as you like. One

less thing to worry about. Won't that be nice?"

"Oh, yeah, this will be a huge load off of my mind," he said flatly. He shook his head, sincerity returning to his voice. "Thank you, though. I wasn't sure what I was going to do."

"You are welcome, Mr. Alexander. You earned it and more."

There was a buzz from the intercom. He tapped the "peep" button. The face looking back at him managed to make his heart skip a beat. After all of these years, after all of this time, it still managed to do that. He quickly answered.

"Michella!" he said, a bit more excitement making to his voice than he'd intended.

"Trev. Can I come in?" she asked, a smile that was almost nervous and shy warming her expression.

Lex turned to his guest/superintendent, touching the mute button.

"By all means. I must be going. I only remained so that I could explain the situation personally, and give you my gratitude."

"Yeah. Yeah, come on up," he replied, releasing the mute and tapping the entry buzzer.

He turned back to Miss Misra.

"I do hope you'll consider working with my Uncle, if he requests it," she said, stepping toward the door, "We have plenty of legitimate pursuits that could benefit from your skills. And a handful that are less legitimate, if you are feeling adventurous."

"Right now I think it might be a good idea to lie low for a while."

"A wise decision. And Lex?" she said.

"Yes?"

She removed her glasses, leaning forward to plant a slow, tender kiss on his lips. When they parted, she looked him in the eyes.

"Thank you," she said.

"Uh..." he replied. It was the best he could manage.

The smirk came to her lips again as she replaced her glasses. She opened the door and stepped into the hall, encountering Michella on the way out.

"Miss Modane, congratulations on all of your success, and my compliments to your exceptional investigative work. I have great respect for what you've done."

"Oh, uh, well thank you," Michella replied, offering her hand.

Miss Misra shook it gracefully, and continued on her way. Lex, in an act nearly as difficult as the rest of his adventure combined, managed to keep from watching her go.

"Who was that?" Michella asked, as Lex closed the door behind her.

"Mmm? Her? Oh, no one. She's my new landlord's assistant," he replied quickly.

"She seems nice. But that dress was a bit much," she said, turning back to the door.

Lex took the opportunity to glance at his reflection in the flat screen to make sure that there wasn't any lingering evidence of Miss Misra's gratitude. On his face, at least.

"How did you know I'd be here? I only just got back."

"I asked Marv to give me a call if you showed up. He said you'd be walking home, so I waited a few hours."

"That was thorough."

"Investigative reporter, remember?"

"Heh, Yeah. … So, Michella. It's been a while," he said, dumbly.

"It has," she said, looking away.

She definitely seemed nervous. There was a tension in the air, the kind of feeling you get when you go on a first date with an old friend who you hope can be something more. A fear of losing something good in the pursuit of making it better.

"Congratulations on all of the coverage."

"Thank you. And thank you for your help. I couldn't have done it without you."

"I... I've only really glanced at the news. A lot on my mind lately. What ended up happening?"

"Plenty. It turns out Trent tried to cover his tracks after you escaped. He erased everything. The Gemini information that you'd given me a copy of, video footage from that day, recordings, conversations. Every piece of surveillance for the last three months was wiped clean, and there are missing records dating back over three years. It turns out VectorCorp as a whole was legitimately unaware of his plans. It was entirely financed by their black budget, security funds. We can't turn up anything to suggest there had been authorization, or even consultation, by VectorCorp proper. Their stock price took a hit, but VC is coming out of this looking like the victim. This was Trent's baby, and had it not been for you, all of those people would have died. And if it hadn't been for the information you gave me, Trent might still have walked for lack of evidence."

She clutched her hands awkwardly in front of her.

"Do you want to sit down?" Lex asked.

She nodded. Out of habit, he leaned down to clear a spot, having already forgotten it had been cleaned. She sat on the futon. He joined her.

"This the first time I've been to your new apartment. This place is barely the size of our old dorm room," she remarked, looking around.

"Yeah, I've been having some cash flow problems."

Both sat quietly for a moment. When they spoke, it was simultaneously.

"Trevor, I-" she began.

"Michella, you-" he said, continuing, "No, you first."

"It's just. I... When we were together, I was happy, you know? We were a good couple. But even then, I felt like you were just a little boy. Not mature. Not living in the real world. I was wrong about you. I thought that you were

selfish, that the only person that mattered to you was you. That mess with the Tremor Grand Prix... You wanted what you wanted, and you didn't care what you had to do to get it. You were willing to destroy yourself if it meant you could have what you thought life was all about. I just... I didn't have it in me to watch you do that to yourself. Over the last two years you seemed to be straightening out, and then that business with Nick Patel... I was wrong. You saved those people. You risked your life, and you didn't even want credit. I was wrong about you, and I don't know what I can say..."

"No..." Lex said, taking her hand in his, "Listen, Michella. You weren't wrong. You knew me better than I did, and it wasn't until this past month that I realized it. A lot has happened in the past month. Things I haven't told you. Things you wouldn't believe if I did. Things even I have a hard time believing. I learned a lot about myself."

They hugged for a long time.

"So... where do we go from here? Do you want to tell me the rest of what happened?"

"I do, but... later. For right now, let's just have right now."

She smiled and nodded, pulling his arm around her and leaning her head on his shoulder. It was a perfect moment, one that he wished would last forever. One that, inevitably, was interrupted by his chirping slidepad. With a groan, he glanced at it. It was a message from Karter.

"Lex. Got the feedback. Good data. I have a job for you. New ship I want you to try. Get back to me," it read.

"Who was it?" Michella asked, eyes closed and snuggling closer.

"No one. I'll tell you later," he said.

Lex looked at the heavenly creature nestled under his arm. He had a new ship, he had his little apartment, and for this moment, he had his girl. He had everything he needed. His finger hovered over the delete button. With a smirk, he tapped save instead.

Well, *almost* everything...

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Thank you for reading this, the first of what I hope to be many Science Fiction novels. Though I genuinely enjoyed writing this, my first love is fantasy. If you like my writing, please take a moment to sample some of my other works. The first book of my Book of Deacon trilogy is available for free at many retailers. If you have anything to say, good or bad, I would love to hear it, in the form of a review, or if you prefer, an email.

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